WITH WOLSELEY TO KUMASI

A TALE OF THE FIRST ASHANTI WAR

BY CAPT. F.S. BRERETON.

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With Wolseley to Kumasi

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THE ENEMY BOARD THE LAUNCH

With Wolseley to Kumasi

A Tale of the First Ashanti War

BY

CAPTAIN F. S. BRERETON

Author of

"With Roberts to Candahar" "The Dragon of Pekin" "Foes of the Red Cockade" "A Soldier of Japan" "Roger the Bold" etc etc.

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MAIN

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	A Great Misfortune	1
II.	A Gallant Rescue	15
III.	A Mining Expedition	31
IV.	A Chase and a Fight	51
V.	A Question of Importance	72
VI.	Forest Dangers	89
VII.	Forewarned is Forearmed	106
VIII.	Besiegers and Besieged	125
IX.	Deceiving the Enemy	143
X.	A Native Fleet	161
XI.	Running the Gauntlet	181
XII.	In Home Waters	201
XIII.	On Special Service	219
XIV.	A Brush with the Enemy	238
XV.	Bluejackets, Charge!	255
XVI.	News from Ashanti	271
XVII.	A Well-laid Scheme	286
XVIII.	King Koffee, the Terrible	303
XIX.	Dick Strikes a Blow	318
XX.	The Destruction of Kumasi	335

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

THE ENEMY BOARD THE LAUNCH . . . . *Frontispiece* 187

"HE FELL WITH A SPLASH INTO THE WATER" 64

JOHNNIE BRINGS BAD NEWS 107

"THE BLADE FLASHED BENEATH HIS ARM" 130

THEY SIGHT A BRITISH WAR-VESSEL 198

"OUR AGENT WAS KILLED AT THE FIRST DISCHARGE" . . 216

"DICK FELT THE CRUEL STING OF THE LASHES" 295

"DICK STRUCK WITH THE SWIFTNESS OF LIGHTNING" . . 322

MAP OF THE GOLD COAST SHOWING THE ROUTE OF THE EXPEDITION 256

CHAPTER I

A Great Misfortune

Dick Stapleton tossed restlessly on his bamboo bed, till the rickety legs creaked ominously and the mosquito net waved to and fro, threatening to descend upon his head. The heat was stifling. Inside his room the thermometer stood at an unusual height, even for this Gold Coast country, where high readings are a common occurrence, and where hot nights are the rule rather than the exception. The windows of the house in which he slept, or vainly attempted to do so, were thrown wide open, but despite that fact, they admitted nothing but the deep and ever-recurring boom of the surf, which beats upon the sandy beach of the Fanti country without ceasing. Boom! Boom! The thunder of the waves seemed to shake even the land, while in his mind's eye Dick could see the spray rise high, and then fall back as white as milk, seething and foaming, to be swallowed by the next breaker as it curled its green crest on to the sand. Not a breath stirred on this sultry night. The leaves on the forest trees within a stone's-throw of the house made no movement. Nothing, in fact, appeared to have the energy for movement on this night save the myriad

mosquitoes, which seemed to revel in the heat, and an occasional beast in the forest, whose piercing cry was wont at one time to startle our hero.

"Oh, for a breeze!" sighed Dick. "If only a cool wind would play into the room a fellow might fall asleep. This mosquito net stifles me, and yet I dare not throw it aside or I shall be well-nigh eaten. I feel, too, as if I had a little fever, and that is just the very thing I wish to avoid. I've work before me; difficulties to set aside, and—and affairs to arrange."

For some reason his hand sought for a box deposited beneath the bed, and his fingers touched the lock to make sure that it was closed.

"All that stands between me and starvation," said Dick. "Just a bare two hundred pounds in gold, a store almost depleted of goods, and two houses which no one seems to want. There's the business, too, and James Langdon."

For a while his thoughts went to the man whose name he had mentioned, and he brooded uneasily.

"He ought to go," he said to himself. "Father trusted him, I know; but I am sure of his dishonesty. He has been robbing the store for years, and he will rob me if I let him stay. He is a sneaking half-caste, a rogue who cannot be trusted, and if it were not for father he should be dismissed. Well, to-morrow I will go into the matter. I'm tired to-night. If only it were not so frightfully hot!"

Dick was peevish and out of temper. He had worked hard all day, and was very tired, for the heat had been great. And now that he had thrown himself on his bed he could not sleep. The old worries filled his

mind, only instead of being lessened, the silence of the night, the droning insects, the shrill cries from the forests, and the deep boom of the surf, intensified his difficulties, till they sat upon his young shoulders like a millstone. Presently, however, he fell into a doze, and later his deep breathing showed that he was asleep. Asleep? No! For he started suddenly and sat erect on his bed.

"I thought I heard something," he said in a whisper. "That was a step outside. Some one knocked against the chair on the platform and tipped it over. I don't like that noise."

He threw one leg half out of the bed and waited, for, to be candid, Dick had no liking for an encounter with some evil-doer in the small hours. Then, mustering courage, he threw the mosquito net aside, rearranged it over the bed, and stealthily crept to the farther side. His hand sought the box which contained his worldly possessions, and tucking it beneath his arm he stole softly out on to the verandah. There was a brilliant moon, high up in the sky, and the silvery rays played softly upon the sandy beach, upon the crests of the breakers, upon the white street and the white houses, and upon the bush and forest which formed at this time the surroundings of Cape Coast Castle. There were deep shadows everywhere, and Dick's eyes sought them, and endeavoured to penetrate to their depths. He stood still and listened, though the thump of his fast-beating heart was all that came to his ears above the boom of the surf. That and the eternal droning of the insects which swarmed around. No one seemed to be abroad this night, and yet——

"Some one was here," thought Dick, with conviction, as he stepped across the wooden platform, with its overhanging roof, which went by the name of verandah. "Here is the deck-chair in which I was sitting just before I turned in, and it is now on its side. I left it all right. And—— That's some one!"

He drew back somewhat suddenly, while his breathing became faster. For some one, an indefinite shape, a native perhaps, had stepped from one of the shadows and had peered at the verandah. Then detecting the white youth, he had vanished into the shadow again, as silently and as stealthily as any snake.

"I don't like that at all," thought Dick. "I'm alone here, and the people know that there is gold. They know that father kept his money in the house, and now that he is gone they must be aware that I have it. I'll camp out here for the night. I wish to goodness I had gone down to the Castle and left this box under lock and key."

He stepped back into the room which he had just vacated, and felt along the wall till his hand hit upon a rifle. Then he sought for cartridges, and, having found a handful, tucked them into the pocket of his pyjamas, and one into the breech of his weapon. That done, he went on to the verandah, and, pulling his chair into a corner, sat down with the gun across his legs and the box beneath his feet.

"I could have slept," he grumbled. "But that's out of the question. Some blackguard wants the money, and that must be prevented. Besides, these Fantis would knife me with pleasure. I don't care for the thought of that, so here goes for a night-watch. Dick

Stapleton, my boy, you'll be anything but fresh to-morrow."

Had he been an older soldier, Dick would have remained on his legs, and would have patrolled the length of the verandah, and even shown himself beyond the house, out in the brilliant patch where the moon rays fell. But he was only a young fellow, and, in addition, he was tired, fagged out by work and anxiety. The heat told upon him, too, and the booming of the surf, instead of helping to keep him wakeful, seemed, now that he was outside his room, to lull him to sleep.

His excitement, and the forebodings which the strange figure had brought to his mind, soon calmed down and disappeared. His head drooped. A cool wind got up and gently fanned his heated cheek, and within half an hour he was asleep—far more deeply, too, than he had been when stretched beneath his mosquito net. He snored loudly and contentedly. The gun slipped to the ground, and caused him to stir uneasily. But he did not awake. He slipped farther down into his chair, and slept the sleep of the exhausted, oblivious of his danger, forgetful of the vow he had made, and of the watch which he had meant to keep. And his snores, the click of his rifle, and the shuffle of his feet as he stretched them out, were as a signal to the rascal who lurked in the shadows. He slipped into the open and listened. Then he dropped on all fours, and stealthily crept towards the verandah. At times he was hidden in the deep shade cast by the many shrubs which surrounded the house, while at others he knelt fully outlined—a short, broad-shoul-

dered savage, as naked as the day when he was born, dark grey in colour, and glistening under the moon's rays, for his body was freely anointed with oil. At such moments his pace quickened till he reached another friendly shadow, where he lurked for a minute or more, only the whites of his eyes showing occasionally as he stretched his head from the shade. Soon he was near the verandah, and seemed on the point of leaping the low rail which enclosed it, when an unearthly shriek—the familiar night-call of a forest animal—broke the silence, and set him trembling.

"I'd wring its neck!" he growled hoarsely, while he wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. "The brute startled me, and may have awakened the young fool on the verandah. If it has—well, I must have the money. I must have it this night, too, and without further waiting. To-morrow will be too late. He'll know the truth then. He's cunning, this young Stapleton—cunning. He's deep and too knowing, and he suspects. To-morrow the books will show what has been happening these five years and more, and then——"

His eyes rolled, and an oath escaped his lips, for he thought of the Castle, of the cell which would receive him, and of the labour to which he would be condemned.

"To-night or never!" he muttered. "And if the youngster stirs or attempts to hold me, why, there's something here to make him alter his mind. Something to stop him altogether, to shut his mouth, and keep his evidence from reaching the authorities."

The thought seemed to please him, for he sat back

on his heels and gripped his revolver more tenaciously. But a moment later reflection brought some doubt to his mind, and his breathing became deeper and more hurried.

"They'd know," he said, with an oath. "They're bound to know, in any case, for I must go. Once I have the money, I must take to the forest, and trust to picking up a boat along the coast. Even then I shall have to wait for months, for there will be a hue and cry. I'll have to make for King Koffee's country, and take service with him. He'll remember who has been so good about the supply of guns and ammunition. Yes, I'll make for Kumasi, and wait there till the storm has blown over. Ah! he's snoring again. I must be quick. The morning will be coming in a couple of hours."

The thought that he had a haven near at hand seemed to spur the miscreant on to his purpose, for he rose to his feet and emerged into the open, where the brilliant moon showed him even more clearly. It was obvious that he had purposely darkened his skin, for behind his ears, on the broad of his back, and on the palms of his hands were dusky-white patches, which he had omitted to cover. In fact, the robber who lurked so close to the house, and whose fingers grasped the revolver, was none other than James Langdon, whose name was uppermost in Dick Stapleton's mind. This thief, who came stealthily in the night, was the half-caste manager of the store which Dick's father had kept for many a year in Cape Coast Castle. Short and squat he appeared in the moon's rays, but the light was insufficient to show what manner of man he actu-

ally was. Had it been lighter one would have seen a heavy, ugly face, with thick lips and splayed-out nose, telling unmistakably of his negro origin. Crisp, curly locks, jet black in colour, covered his head, while some straggling hairs grew from his upper lip. The brows were low, the eyes too close together, while the thickness of the lips alone seemed to denote a cruel nature. James Langdon was, in fact, far from prepossessing in appearance, while he bore a character which was none of the best. He had a dusky complexion, sharp, white teeth, and that whiteness of the eye which belongs to a native.

For years he had acted as Mr. Stapleton's manager, and tales were whispered in the place that he robbed his employer, that he had dealings with the natives of the interior which, had they come to the knowledge of Mr. Stapleton or to the ears of the authorities, would have gained for him instant dismissal, and in all probability imprisonment. But Mr. Stapleton had never suspected, and the apathy of the officials had caused them to disregard rumours. And so it happened that James went on with his peculations and his illicit trading till Dick came out to the Gold Coast, just four months before, and at once plunged into the business with the intention of mastering every detail. Gradually, as the books and the working of the store became familiar to him, Dick had begun to suspect, and then had become almost certain of the fact that the manager was dishonest.

"I'll make sure first of all," he had said. "I am new to ledgers and journals, and, in fact, to trade of any sort, and it is possible that I may be mistaken. I'll

go through the entries again, so that there shall be no room for doubt."

Unconsciously his manner had altered to the manager. He was too honest to be on familiar terms with a man whom he suspected of robbing his father and as a result James guessed that he was found out, that this young Englishman regarded him with suspicion. He would have fled the place then and there had he had the means. But he had long since spent all his ill-gotten wealth. He remained, therefore, and while still contemplating the step, went on with his work as if he had nothing to fear. A few days later a sharp bout of fever, not the first which he had suffered by any means, attacked Mr. Stapleton, and to Dick's inexpressible grief he succumbed.

"Then I must go," said James Langdon, and with that he promptly decided to rob the son and decamp.

Only a week had passed since Mr. Stapleton's death, when the half-caste proceeded to put his plan into execution; and there he was, disguised in order that Dick should not recognize him, naked and well smeared with oil, so that if his young employer happened to awake and endeavoured to detain him, his grip would instantly slip from his body.

"He's fast asleep, and now's the time," whispered James, running his fingers across his forehead to wipe the perspiration away. "I'll creep in and search for the box."

He stood to his full height and peered over the rail of the verandah at the sleeping figure. Then he hoisted himself over the low wall and stole along the wooden flooring. It took more than a minute to reach the

door of the room which Dick had recently vacated, for the sleeper was evidently troubled with dreams, and he breathed and snorted heavily, each sound bringing the robber to a stop, and setting him shivering with apprehension, for this half-caste was a coward at heart. But at length he found himself within the room.

"Beneath the bed," he said to himself. "That's where his father kept the gold, and no doubt the young fool does the same. He'll have left the box there, and I shall be able to get it and slip away without discovery."

He was at the bed by now, and his arms were groping vainly beneath it. An oath escaped him when he discovered that the box was gone, and he sat back on his heels trembling, and furious with disappointment.

"Perhaps he has moved it," he said at length. "He guessed that some one was about, else why did he go on to the verandah to keep watch, and why the gun? I'll strike a match and take a look round. First of all, is he quiet?"

He stole to the open door and peered at the recumbent figure, now half illuminated by the moon. He could see the head lolling forward, the hands and arms trailing to the floor, and the stock of the rifle. The legs and feet, and the box for which he sought, were still in the shadow.

"All's well," he thought. "A match will not awake him, and there is no one about to see the light."

There was a faint, rasping sound, and the glimmer of a flame lit the room. The half-caste searched each corner diligently till the match burned to his fingers.

Then he flung it aside with an oath and rapidly struck another.

"Then he must have the box with him," he exclaimed hoarsely, while the frown on his ugly brows increased as he realized that his difficulties were suddenly increased. "He's asleep. I'll capture the prize and run to the nearest shadow. If he follows——"

His fingers felt the lock of the revolver while he lifted the weapon and took aim at the moonlit doorway.

"I could hit him with ease, though I have never fired one of these before," he said. "Time's going. It must be done at once."

Bracing himself with the thought, the miscreant stole to the door, and then along the verandah till he was close to Dick. His hand went out to search for the coveted box, and then drew back suddenly, while the blood in his veins froze with terror. For Dick moved restlessly and spoke in his sleep. Had he discovered the attempt? Was he about to pounce upon the intruder? The doubt set the half-caste shivering till desperation lent him strength, and he levelled the revolver. His eyes shone strangely in the moon's rays as they fixed themselves on the unconscious youth, while the finger which lay on the trigger stiffened, causing the hammer to rise slowly into cocking position. Another movement would have been Dick's last. But the dream had passed, the nightmare which had troubled him was gone, and he slept easily.

"I thought it was all up," growled the robber hoarsely, to himself. "He startled me. There's the box."

His eye had suddenly lit upon it, and lowering his revolver he stretched out to it, caught the handle, and

with a tug dragged it from beneath Dick's feet. Then he scrambled from his knees, and was in the act of leaping the rail of the verandah when the sleeper started erect. A cry escaped him, and in an instant he was on his feet. Then with a shout of fury he threw himself upon the robber. One hand gripped the ruffian's neck, while the other closed about his arm. For a second, perhaps, he retained his hold. Then a quick movement of the half-caste threw him off, his hands slipping from the well-oiled surface. There was a sharp report, and the flash of a revolver in his face. Then he was left, still gripping at the air, while James Langdon sought safety in flight, his dark figure flitting across the brilliant moonlit patch to the nearest shadow.

"Stop!" shouted Dick, now thoroughly awake. "I know who it is. I recognized you by means of the flash. It is James Langdon, the man who has robbed my father for years. Stop, and return the box this instant. I promise to let you go free afterwards. If you refuse I will shoot you down as you run."

He stooped swiftly and picked up his weapon. Then he leapt over the rail and ran into the open.

"Now," he said, as he faced the deep shadow in which James had disappeared, and in which he still lurked, fearful that his figure would be seen as he crossed to the next, "come out and return the box. I give you half a minute. After that I fire."

He could see the faint outline of the man, while the moving leaves told of his probable position. Dick levelled his weapon, and waited till he judged the half-minute had passed.

"Once more," he called out, "are you coming?"

There was no answer, only the leaves shook more violently. Dick took careful aim, and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into the very centre of the figure which he had dimly perceived. But he had a cunning fox to deal with, and forgot that he himself stood brilliantly outlined in the open. James Langdon knew that he had but to draw his fire to escape to the forest, for long before Dick could load again he would have gained the woods. He waited, therefore, till our hero's patience was exhausted. Then he threw himself flat on the ground till the shot rang out. An instant later he was on his feet racing into the forest. And after him went his pursuer, hot with rage and anxiety. Dashing into the thick bush he endeavoured to come up with the fugitive, but all was dense darkness here. He struck his head against an overhanging bough, and a moment later caught his feet in a twining vine, coming with a crash to the ground. He was up in a moment, only to meet with the same fate again, while the half-caste, better versed in the ways of the forest, crept steadily along on all fours, feeling his way through the tangle. Dick was beaten, and in his rage he blazed right and left into the forest; but the shots did no harm to the fugitive, while hardly had their reverberation died down when there followed the mocking calls of the half-caste.

"Set a watch and keep it, Dick Stapleton," he shouted, "and learn to be wary when James Langdon is about. As to the box, have no fear for its safety. I promise to take care of the gold which it contains."

He gave vent to a boisterous laugh, a laugh of

triumph, and then went on his way, leaving Dick trembling with fury.

"Listen to this, you ruffian," he shouted back. "You are a knave, and have robbed me as you did my father. Don't think to escape. Some day we shall meet again, and then you shall answer for this crime."

A jeering laugh was his only answer, and dispirited, and well-nigh on the verge of tears, he retraced his steps to the house, and threw himself into his chair, a prey to the worst misgivings, wondering what he should do next, how he was to live, and how to repair his ruined fortunes.

CHAPTER II

A Gallant Rescue.

MODERATELY tall and broad, with well-tanned skin and pleasant features, Dick Stapleton looked a gentleman and a decent fellow as he lolled on an old box which lay on the beach at Cape Coast Castle. He was dressed in white ducks from head to foot, while a big solar topee covered his head. His collar was thrown wide open, a light scarf being tied loosely round the neck, while his whole appearance gave one the impression that he was decidedly at ease. And yet he was not happy. A week had passed since the robbery, and in that time he had given full particulars to an apathetic police force. He had offered a reward for the recovery of the treasure, and he had wondered how and where he was to live.

"There are the two houses," he had said over and over again to himself. "One is the store, and has perhaps fifty pounds worth of goods in it. The other, the living-house, is of greater value. But they are useless to me, for without capital I cannot run the store, while without means I cannot live in the house. And I haven't, so far, been able to come across a tenant. I've five pounds in cash, and when that goes I'm penniless."

He began to throw pebbles aimlessly, vaguely wondering what he could do to lighten his difficulties.

"It is plain that there is no work for me here," he said at length. "Practically every white man between this and Elmina is an official of some sort, while the natives don't count. Of course there are the merchants and the storekeepers, but then I am neither the one nor the other now. Father even never made much more than a bare living, thanks, perhaps, to that robber. Ah, if I had had the means to organize an expedition I would have followed him; but then where should I have obtained an escort? These Fantis, fine fellows though they look, are really cowards, so I am told."

He watched one of the ebony natives lounging in the shade some little distance away, and noted his tall and well-proportioned figure. Then he turned to others, who sat with their toes dipping in the water, and their knees submerged every now and again as a big wave thundered on the sand. They were the kroomen, who were accustomed to play between shore and ship, and bring off passengers and baggage.

"They will have work soon," thought Dick, as his eye lit upon a steamer approaching. "But they know that it will be an hour yet before she is at her moorings off the coast. She's a big vessel. One of the regular callers."

For a little while he gazed at the ship, wondering who were aboard, and which of the white officials who had gone away on leave some time before, fagged and debilitated by the trying climate, would return, and come ashore fresh and cheery, with that ruddy complexion common to Europeans and to natives of the British Isles.

"Lucky beggars," he thought. "They will have

everything clear before them. They will take up the old work as if they had merely been for a day's shooting up-country, and their friends whom they relieve will take their bunks and sail away. It would be a fine thing for me if I could get a billet under the Government."

He lay there for a long time reflecting, and as he did so the ship came rapidly closer. When a mile from the sandy coast she dropped her anchor, and those ashore could easily see the splash as it entered the water. Then she lay to, with her broadside facing the land, rolling and heaving with monotonous regularity. Dick watched the bustle aboard listlessly, for it was no unusual sight for dwellers on the Gold Coast, the White Man's Grave. Time and again he wondered whether there might be some one aboard to whom he could offer the store and the house, or some one who would befriend him and perhaps obtain some post for him which would enable him to work for a living. For as the reader will have learned, Dick was in difficulties. He had come out some months before at his father's urgent call, and had barely had time to look into the business of the store when his father died. Then came the theft of the gold, and here was our hero stranded indeed, with little experience, and with very few years behind him. No wonder that he was dismayed. That as his fingers closed on the five golden sovereigns in his pocket his mind went time and again to the future, wondering what would happen when those golden coins had perforce been changed into silver, and the silver had dwindled away.

"If it had been in London," he said, "I should have

soon found work of some sort, or I would have eagerly taken the Queen's shilling and enlisted. Here there is no work, at least not for a white man, and there is no supervising or overseeing job that I can get. Lastly, there is no recruiting station."

He had but stated the facts. For the past week he had been the round of the town, and had even gone, cap in hand, to the Governor.

"We're sorry for you, Stapleton," the latter's secretary had said, as he shook Dick's hand, "but we have nothing to offer. We can't even take over your property, nor promise to look after it while you may be away. The best thing for you to do will be to get back to the Old Country, and try your luck there. You think of enlisting, do you? Well, it's a fine profession, is soldiering, and you are the lad to do well. Perhaps you might even find your way out here again, for let me tell you something. That rogue, King Koffee, is stirring his Ashantee tribesmen up for war. He is itching for a fight, and means to force one. So you might pay us a visit. By the way, are you really in earnest?"

"About the army, sir?" asked Dick.

"Yes, about enlisting. So many young fellows threaten to take the step, but fail for want of pluck when the critical moment comes. You see, there are not so many gentlemen rankers, and whatever others say, there's no doubt that the life is a rough one, and particularly so to the son of a gentleman. That's barrack life, of course. Out on active service it's different, for then officers and men live practically the same life, and put up with the same hardships."

"I know it's not all a feather bed, sir," replied Dick, respectfully. "But I'm stranded. I can't be kicking my heels out here in idleness, and I see few prospects of selling the store and the property. So I shall take what I can get for the goods now on hand and get a passage to England. If I can I shall work my way back, for it would be as well to learn to rough it from the first."

"And perhaps I could help you," was the answer. "Look here, Stapleton, we're sorry for you. It was very hard luck losing your money in that way, and if you are really keen on returning home with a view to entering the army, I'll get you a post aboard a steamer. A word from the Governor would influence the captain, and as you say, it is better to rough it now, and get a little practice, before joining the ranks. There, too, I can do something, I imagine. Come again when you have thoroughly made up your mind, and I will see what can be done."

Dick had to be satisfied with that, and as he lay there on the sand he had firmly come to a decision, and resolved to ask for a post aboard the steamer then lying in the roads, and return in her to England.

"But first I'll see whether there is any one there who wants a store or a house," he said. "They'll be coming soon. I see the surf-boats are on the way, and the rope gangway has been lowered."

He watched as some passengers clambered down the gangway, their white drill clothing showing crisply against the dark background of the ship, while others, less capable of the somewhat difficult feat of descending a swaying ladder, were lowered in a chair slung from

the yard. Then his eye lazily followed as the kroo boys thrust their long paddles into the sea, and shot the big craft from the vessel's side. A second took its place at the gangway, and another load of passengers, all in gleaming white clothes as before, descended or were slung into the boat, and were rowed away. After that he could see the baggage being lowered down till other boats, which had now gone alongside, were well filled.

"There's Brown, who went home six months ago, just before I came out," said Dick, suddenly, as the first boat drew near the outer margin of the surf. "I remember he brought a message to me from father. How well he's looking. When I saw him last he was a skeleton."

He rose to his feet and strolled down to the edge of the sandy beach, where he waited to greet his friend. There were one or two others whom he recognized, and they waved to him. But for a little while passengers and friends ashore were completely divided, for a wide belt of raging surf stretched between them. On the outer fringe of this the surf-boat lay to, the kroo boys standing along the sides with the tips of their paddles just dipping in the water. They made no movement save every now and again when a big swelling breaker caused them to roll, and threatened to carry the boat into the surf. Then there was a word from the headman, the paddles dipped deeply, and the boat swung back from the surf.

"It wants doing to-day," said an officer, who had now taken his place beside Dick. "There's no wind to speak of, but there's quite a heavy surf. I always like

watching those kroo boatmen. Clever beggars, Stapleton, and full of pluck when engaged in a job of this sort. Ah, they are off."

A shout came over the water, and at once all the paddles were plunged deep into the sea. The boat, helped by a breaker, sprang forward into the surf, and then being caught up by an enormous rolling billow, she shot forward on its crest, being lifted many feet into the air, till, in fact, those aboard her seemed to be far above those on the beach. But in a moment she dropped down again, and for a few seconds was out of sight.

"Looks as though the following wave would cover her," said the officer, as he watched keenly for another sight of the boat. "Those beggars are paddling as if for their lives."

At that instant the surf-boat had again come to view, and as the officer had remarked, the kroo boys were plying their paddles with tremendous energy. They looked over their shoulders with some apprehension, and then at the repeated shouts of their leader they dug their blades into the boiling surf and struggled to push the craft towards the shore. But in spite of their exertions the surf-boat seemed to be receding. She appeared to be slowly gliding backward down the far side of the billow which had just passed, falling, in fact, towards the gulf which lay between it and the monstrous wave which followed.

"They're done," cried the officer.

"They'll manage it, I think," said Dick, quietly. "But it's touch and go."

And that it proved to be. The men aboard shouted,

and drove their paddles with fierce energy, while the spray licked about them, and the following wave seemed to surround them. The passengers, seeing their danger, behaved like sensible beings. They sat still and clutched their seats, while they looked backward apprehensively. Suddenly the boat began to move forward. The efforts of the paddlers were having the desired effect. It slowly gathered way, though the following wave, with its green curling crest now erected high above the craft, seemed to be about to fall upon it and swamp the passengers. Another shout, another fierce struggle, and the boat shot forward, the crest of the wave doubled up, caved in at that point, subsided into the seething boil about it, and then glided under the surf-boat, lifting it swiftly into the air. How it moved! It might have been shot from a gun. And the kroo men had reversed their paddles. They were now doing their utmost to restrain the boat, to keep her from being dashed on the shore. It was a magnificent struggle. The curling wave, a huge mass of foam and water, burst with a thunderous boom on the sand, and breaking into a million cascades, shot its torrents up on to the beach. The boat fell as suddenly till its keel was close to the sand, when it leapt forward again and finally came with a bump to the ground. At once the kroo boys leapt over the side, waist-deep in the receding water. They were almost dragged from their feet, but they clutched the boat, and putting their united strength to the task, ran her a few feet higher up, till, when the water subsided, she was left almost high and dry.

"Bravo!" shouted the officer and Dick together. "It

was a narrow squeak. Ah, how are you, Preston?" went on the former as he recognized a friend, while our hero turned to the young fellow whom he had last seen in England.

By now a number of other residents had arrived, and there was an animated meeting, the passengers leaping out and shaking hands. Amid all the excitement, the hand-gripping, the questions as to friends at home, and as to matters on the Gold Coast, no one took notice of the following boats save Dick, who had greeted his friend and left him to pass on to others. He watched, therefore, as the second craft approached, and stared at the occupants as the stout vessel lay off the breakers waiting for the propitious moment to arrive when it would be wise to push forward.

There were five passengers in all, three of them officers returning to duty, and two others, of whom one seemed to be a man of some fifty years of age, thin and almost cadaverous, while the last by all appearances was a very stout, short man, who found the heat trying, for he fanned his face with an enormous topee, then mopped his brows with an exceedingly red bandana handkerchief, and finally, with a start of surprise, stood up and stared back at the oncoming waves with every appearance of dismay. Dick heard him shout, and a moment later the tall, thin man had swept him to his seat again with an adroit movement of the arm.

"A stranger, evidently," thought Dick. "He has never been in the surf before. The other man knows the ropes well, while the officers I recognize as old residents. Ah, they've started. The little fat beggar doesn't like it."

The stout man evidently felt some tremors, for he clutched at the side, pushing his head in between two of the kroo men, till his companion, seeing that he was in the way, dragged him back and spoke sharply to him. After that he remained as if rooted to his seat, staring at the wave which followed, and shuddering as the boat was lifted to the summit of a crest, and again as she as quickly slid back into the abyss behind. A shriek escaped him as the craft slowly receded, while the harder the paddles worked and their leader shouted, the more did the terror of the unaccustomed situation seem to fill this little stranger. A moment later a shout from Dick and a chorus of yells attracted the attention of those ashore. They turned to find the boat gone. She had been completely engulfed by the following wave, and for a minute nothing but seething water could be seen. Then a black arm shot up, and later the whole of the kroo rowers bobbed to the surface like corks, and knowing what was wanted, merely struggled to keep their heads above the surface while the water swept them ashore. Then the three officers appeared, and rapidly followed the example set them.

"Two are missing," shouted Dick, "the fat little man and the thin one."

"Then one at least has gone for good," replied one of the passengers who had just come ashore. "The Dutchman couldn't swim if you paid him. The other could, no doubt. Hullo! What's happening, Stapleton?"

"I'm going in," said Dick, quietly, as he tore at his coat and kicked his shoes off. "Look; there's one, and he's helpless!"

He had no time for more, but coolly nodding to the group, ran into the water, and as a wave crashed into seething foam at his feet he dived into the mass and disappeared. A minute later he was in the trough beyond, and the wave which followed merely lifted him high in the air. There was a warning shout from the shore, and a dozen fingers pointed to his right. But Did did not see them. Nor did he even hear, for the roar of the surf was so great. But he happened to catch sight of an arm, which was instantly submerged.

"That is one," he said to himself. "I'll get him if I dive."

Dick had learned to be wary, and knew that it is as dangerous to approach a drowning man from behind as from the front when he is still full of vigour. He dived, struck out beneath the water, touched something, and struggled to the surface, clutching the tail of a coat. He pulled at it, and slowly the fat face of the stout little passenger appeared, and close to his that of the thin man, the one with cadaverous cheeks. Then a pair of arms came into sight, and Dick gathered that the stout stranger had gripped at the nearest person and had dragged him down with him, making escape impossible, making it even out of the question for the taller man to struggle for existence.

"Better get them ashore like this," he thought, with wonderful coolness considering the danger. "There's a wave coming. I'll copy the kroo boys and wait for it. Then I'll try to get all three of us flung on the beach."

He took a firm hold of the collar of the stout man, who was apparently unconscious, for his eyes were

tightly closed, though his arms still retained their grip. But the hold which Dick had obtained enabled him to keep the fat stranger's lips just clear of the water, while it also raised the other man's face. Then Dick lifted his free arm for a second. Those ashore saw the movement and shouted, while three or four of them ran down into the sea. A wave was coming. Dick could see it in spite of the blowing spray which whisked across the water. He took a deep breath and gripped the coat with both hands. The curling crest of a green wave shut out the horizon. There was a crash in his ears. The torrent caught him and almost tore his grip from the collar. Then he felt that he was moving. He and the weight to which he clung shot towards the shore, a foot or more of water covering them. Then there was a second crash, loud shouts from those on the beach, and afterwards—

"Hullo! Does it hurt? Broke just above the elbow and we had such a job. No. Lie down, sir! You are not to move. Lie down, I say! You are safe out of the water."

Dick collapsed flat on his back and stared indignantly at the individual who had dared to give the order. He was a trim, dapper Englishman, with a small beard, and as he returned our hero's gaze he showed every sign of being a man who meant what he said, and would have no nonsense. He was minus his coat, and his sleeves were rolled to the shoulder.

"That's an order," he laughed. "Remember that, youngster. An order. See that you obey it."

He shook his fist, laughed merrily, and proceeded to unroll his sleeves and don his coat.

They were in a large, airy room, and when Dick turned his head, he could catch, through the widely opened windows, a view of the sea, of the ship which had just reached the roads, and a small section of the sandy beach. No one was stirring. The sun was right overhead, and the shadows short and barely perceptible. The atmosphere quivered with the heat. Even the birds and the insects seemed to have succumbed. An unnatural quiet reigned over that portion of the Gold Coast, and only the surf thundered and roared. But that was partly imagination. Dick could not shake off the impression that he was even then swallowed in that huge mass of water, and that he could still hear, was deafened, indeed, by the crash of the billows. He looked again down at the sands. A solitary Fanti boy languidly sauntered across the view. There was a boat drawn up clear of the breakers, and another lay off the ship, a mile from the shore. Was it all a dream, then?

"I say," he suddenly remarked, and he felt surprised that his voice should sound so low and weak. "Er, I say, if you please, where am I, and what has been happening?"

"Happening?" exclaimed his companion, with elevated eyebrows. "Oh, nothing at all. You acted like a madman, they tell me. You dived into the surf, and, as a result, the surf threw you back as if it objected to you. It threw you hard, too, and wet sand is heavy stuff to fall on. You've a broken arm, and may thank your stars that that is all. It ought, by rights, to have been a broken neck and hardly a whole bone in your

body. Where are you? Why, at the Governor's, of course. In clover, my boy."

The jovial individual laughed as he spoke, and came close to the bed.

"You've been an ass," he said bluntly, and with a laugh. "Seriously, my lad, you've done a fine thing. You went into the surf and brought out those two drowning men. It was a fine thing to do, but risky. My word, I think so!"

He took Dick's hand and squeezed it, while the bantering smile left his lips.

"A nigger is at home sometimes in the surf," he explained; "but when you know the coast as I do, you will realize that to get into those breakers means death to most white men. You want to be a fish in the first place, and you need to be made of cast iron in the second. I'm not joking. I've seen many a surf-boat splintered into bits as she bumped on the beach. Men are thrown ashore in the same way, and they get broken. Your arm is fractured, and a nice little business it has been to get it put up properly. The Dutchman is still unconscious, and I fancy he swallowed a deal of salt water. Mr. Pepson, the other individual whom you saved, is quite recovered. He's one of those fellows who is as hard as nails. But there, that'll do. I'm talking too much. Lie down quietly and try to sleep like a good fellow."

So it was real after all. He had not dreamed it. He had gone into the surf, and the Dutchman was saved.

"And who's this Mr. Pepson?" thought Dick. "And this fellow here must be the doctor. One of the army

surgeons, I suppose. Fancy being at the Governor's house. Phew! That ought to get me the billet aboard the ship." Suddenly he recollected that his fractured arm would make hard work out of the question for a time, and he groaned at the thought.

"Pain?" asked the surgeon. "No? Then worry? What's wrong?"

Dick told him in a few words.

"Then don't bother your head," was the answer. "The Governor is not likely to turn you out while you are helpless, and the time to be worrying will be when you are well. You've friends now, lad. You were no one before—that is, you were one amongst many. Now you have brought your name into prominence. We don't have men fished out of the surf every day of the year."

He spoke the truth, too, and Dick soon realized that his gallant action had brought him much honour and many friends. The Governor came that very afternoon to congratulate him, while the members of the household, the ladies of the Governor's party, fussed about their guest. Officers called to see the plucky youngster, while, such is the reward of popularity, two of the traders on the coast made offers for Dick's houses and the good-will of the stores. It was amazing, and if our hero's head had hummed before with the memory of his buffeting in the surf, it hummed still louder now. He was in a glow. The clothes on his bed seemed like lead. The place stifled him. He longed to be able to get out, to shake off the excitement.

"An attack of fever," said the surgeon that even-

ing, as he came to the room and found Dick wandering slightly. "The shock, hard times for the last few weeks, and thoughtless exposure to the sun, are probable causes. That's what many of the youngsters do. They think that because an older hand can at a pinch work during the heat of the day and in the sun, they can do the same. They can't. They haven't the stamina of older men. Here's an example. He'll be in bed for another week."

And in bed Dick was for more than that time. At last, when the fever had left him, he was allowed to get into a chair, where for a few days he remained till his strength was partially restored. Another week and he emerged into the open. And here at length he made the acquaintance of the men he had rescued from the surf.

CHAPTER III

A Mining Expedition

Dick could have shouted with merriment as the two strangers whom he had rescued after their upset in the surf came up the steep steps of Government House to greet him, and still more was his merriment roused as the stout little man came forward to shake him by the hand. For this rotund and jolly-looking individual was dressed in immaculate white, with an enormously broad red cummerbund about his middle, making his vast girth even more noticeable. His round, clean-shaven face beamed with friendly purpose, while there was about him the air of a leader. He struggled to appear dignified. He held his head high, and showed no sign of feeling abashed, or ashamed at the memory of his conduct aboard the boat.

"Ah, ah!" he gasped, for the climb had taken his breath away. "Bud id is hod for walking, Meinheer Dick, and zese steps zey are sdeep. I greed you brave Englishman as one brave man would anozer. I render zanks for your aid. I am proud to shake ze hand of mine comrade who came into ze wild sea to give me ze help."

"Goodness!" thought Dick, "he speaks as if he had actually been attempting to save his friend, and had not really been the means of almost drowning him."

He glanced furtively at the second stranger, as the fat man grasped his hand and pumped it up and down, while at the same time he vainly endeavoured to mop his streaming forehead. But Dick could read nothing in the face of Mr. Pepson. Perhaps the keen sunken eyes twinkled ever so little. Perhaps that twitch of the thin lips was a smile suppressed. Beyond that there was nothing. Mr. Pepson gazed at his rescuer with evident interest, and seemed barely to notice the presence of his companion. At length, however, he moved forward a step and addressed himself quietly to Dick.

"Let me introduce our friend," he said, with a quaint little bow, removing his topee as he did so. "This is Meinheer Van Somering, of Elmina."

"Dutch by birdh and a Dutchman to ze backbone, Meinheer," exclaimed the stout man, as he released Dick's hand. "I am one of ze residents of Elmina, which was in ze hands of mine coundry till ladely, you undersdand. Id is a spod to visid. Ah! zere you will find comford. But I have nod zanked you."

"Indeed you have. You have said enough. I did nothing to speak of," exclaimed Dick, hastily. "How are you? None the worse for your adventure?"

"None, we thank you," answered Mr. Pepson, interrupting the voluble Dutchman as he was in the act of launching forth into a speech. "We grieve to hear how badly you have fared, and we hope that you are now on the mend. You do not like thanks. I see that plainly. Then I will say very little. I owe you

my life, Mr. Stapleton, and I and all consider your action to have been an extremely plucky one. Now, may we sit down? It is hot, as Meinheer says. And these steps are steep."

"Sdeep! Mein word! In Elmina zere are none like dese. Here, in Cape Coast Castle, everyzing is sdeep. You climb or you run downhill. Zere is no level. Id is derrible!"

The fat little Dutchman threw his hands into the air with a comical expression of disgust, and then flung himself back into a basket chair, causing it to creak and groan and bend to one side, till Dick thought it would certainly collapse.

Mr. Pepson smiled. "Our friend does not think greatly of this English possession of ours," he said, "and there I agree with him, for Elmina is by contrast a charming spot. You have been there, Mr. Stapleton—Dick I think they all call you?"

"No, I have never been to Elmina," Dick was bound to admit.

"Ah, well, it lies some sixteen miles to the west, as you will know, and the Dutch held it for many years—in fact, till recently, when England bought the place. It is beautiful in many ways. There is little fever. The spot is drained and the bush cut back into wide clearings."

"Ah, yes, Meinheer, and led me add, zere is a harbour. Look zere!"

The little Dutchman danced to his feet and tiptoed to the edge of the steep steps by which he had so recently ascended. Then he pointed a condemning finger

at the white sandy beach, and at the thundering surf which crashed upon it.

"See id! Ze cruel waves, which so nearly robbed me of a dear, dear friend, for whose life I struggled till Meinheer Dick plunged do ze rescue. Zere is none of zat at Elmina. We Dutchmen made a harbour years ago. You can land at Elmina as you mighd in Holland. There is nod even a—ah, whad do you call him —ah, I have him, yes, a ribble, zere is nod even zat, Meinheer."

The comical little fellow threw out his chest, as if that were necessary considering its huge dimensions, and patted it gracefully, while he looked round upon his listeners in turn as if seeking for some words of praise and commendation.

"It is true enough," admitted Mr. Pepson, and again Dick thought he detected a half-suppressed smile. "The country to which our friend belongs sent excellent colonists to Elmina. They have a harbour, and why we have not one here passes belief. But there. Why let us compare the two places and their governments? It is sufficient to say that Elmina has advanced as the years have passed, while this possession, which has been in our hands for more than two hundred years, has receded if anything. A cargo of cement and two months' work would have made a harbour. An engineer with limited skill and knowledge could have erected a breakwater which would have enabled small boats to lie snug and secure, while there would have been no need for surf-boats. As to the bush. They call this 'The white man's grave.' And so it is. But the health of the town could be vastly improved

if proper efforts were made. The bush could be cleared and the place drained."

He paused and looked out to sea, while Dick, as he watched the surf and thought over what had been said, could not help feeling that had the measures just mentioned been carried out, his father might still be living, and many another Englishman with him. Indeed, there is little doubt that at the time and until this period Cape Coast Castle and its neighbourhood had been sadly neglected. No English colony had advanced less, and none was so unhealthy, though a little effort would easily have improved matters.

"You are lately from home?" asked Mr. Pepson, suddenly, turning to Dick.

"Four months ago. I came to help my father, who had had a store here for many years. He died a week before you landed."

"Before you aided us in our efforts to reach the land, I think," was the smiling rejoinder. "I knew your father slightly, and I sympathize with you in your loss. Do you propose to remain in these parts?"

The question was asked so quietly that Dick could not imagine that Mr. Pepson had the smallest interest in the answer. And yet, had he watched this stranger, he would have seen a keen glance of the eye, a movement of the hand which denoted eagerness.

"I shall sail for England as soon as my arm is strong enough. I have been promised help in getting a place aboard one of the ships. I shall work my way home, and then seek for employment. I have been rather unlucky."

"You were robbed, we hear. But you still have

some property left, and perhaps you might find work here. What would you say to a trip up-country?"

Mr. Pepson leaned back and surveyed our hero. He drew a cigar from his pocket, bit the end off, and applied a match. And all the while his eyes were on the young fellow who had saved his life. As for Meinheer Van Somering, his cheeks were puffed out with suppressed excitement. He leaned forward till his chair looked as if it would capsize, and he devoured the figure seated before him with eyes which were almost hidden behind the wreathes of fat which clothed his cheeks.

"Mind," said Mr. Pepson, calmly, "a trip such as I suggest would not be a holiday. There are dangers other than connected with fever. There are natives. Have you heard of King Koffee's hosts of warriors?"

Dick had heard a great deal, and acknowledged the fact.

"Every one seems to think that there will be trouble with them, before very long," he said. "The Fantis, the people on this side of the Pra, go in terror of their lives. Yes, I know that there is danger up-country, but then, Mr. Pepson, it is not so great as to keep an Englishman away."

"Nor one of my gread coundry, Meinheer!"

"Quite right! Quite so, Van Somering. Now listen, Mr. Dick. We—that is, Meinheer and myself—are about to march into the interior, to a spot some miles north and east of the Pra. We are bent on gold-mining, and we have bought a concession from this King Koffee. Meinheer has had his agents there for the past six months—a Dutchman and natives—and

there are shafts sunk, a stockade erected, and gold is being obtained. Now I have come into the venture. The agent is about to retire, and we desire to see our concession, and to place an agent in charge who can be relied upon. The post is a dangerous one. It is also one of responsibility, for many ounces of gold pass through the hands of the man who is in charge. We have been seeking for a successor, and we believe we have found him. You are the young man upon whom our choice has fallen."

Dick could have fallen from his chair, so great was his astonishment.

"But—but—I am only eighteen," he stammered. "And I don't know anything about mining."

"We want a reliable and straightforward man," said Mr. Pepson, quietly, "and we believe you to be that. Your age does not come into the question. In England you might be just leaving for college, or have held a commission in the service for a year. You would hardly be deemed fitted for a post of great responsibility. Out here it is different. You have pluck and tenacity. Every one in the place says that. You speak a little of the Fanti language, and you have some knowledge of the country and the natives. As to the mining, no knowledge is required. The natives sink the shafts and get the gold. You take charge of it, and, at stated periods, send it down to the coast. Your greatest task will be to see that all is secure. To make sure that the Ashantees are friendly, and in the event of probable trouble, to secrete the gold and beat a retreat. In other words, we want a sensible individual, with some command over the natives, and with enough

pluck to enable him to live almost alone in the forests."

The offer was a tempting one. Dick saw employment before him, and a life which he judged would suit him well. Then, too, longer residence in the country would enable him to safeguard his interests on the coast, and perhaps to sell or let the property which was all that he possessed.

"As to the pay," said Mr. Pepson, "that will be liberal, far better, indeed, than an official of your years obtains in these parts. We have a valuable concession, and we can afford to pay the right man. Then, too, there is a question of the store. You have one, we learn. We are prepared to enter into an agreement to take a share of it from you, or we will take all, paying for the house and the goodwill of the business. In addition, since we shall want a residence, we are prepared to rent or buy the residence in which your father lived."

Could he believe his ears? Could it be that he was listening to a proposition which would relieve him of all his difficulties? Dick felt stunned. The roar of the surf, which had troubled him ever since his adventure, threatened to deafen him. He felt dizzy, and sat back in his chair, grasping the arms for support. Meanwhile, Mr. Pepson watched him calmly, Meinheer Van Somering beaming upon him as though he alone were the author of all these suggestions, and as if Dick were indebted to him only.

"I can see a brave man wid half one eye," he gasped, as he fanned his hot cheeks. "Meinheer is brave. He will fighd for us. He is ze man we look for."

"Then I accept," exclaimed Dick, eagerly. "I feel that I am too young for the task, or rather, that I should be at home in England. Out here it is different. I can speak a little of the language, and, if it is any advantage, I can shoot straight. I will go to this concession, and will do my best in your interests. As to the property, your suggestions take my breath away."

"While we are only too glad to have the opportunity of thus helping a friend. Now, Mr. Dick, we shall leave you. It is hot, and you are tired. I will call to-morrow, and will then make a definite offer for the business, or a share of it. Meanwhile I will send some one to you who can give you independent advice as to its value. For business is business, my lad, and it is necessary that your interests should be protected. Now, Meinheer, we will go. It is downhill to the hotel, and therefore easy walking."

He rose as Dick sprang to his feet, and shook our hero warmly by the hand. Meinheer Van Somering repeated the process, and having backed to the edge of the stairs, swept his topee from his head and treated Dick to an elaborate bow. "We shall meed again, Meinheer Dick," he called out. "Till zen a Dutchman is proud do call himself your gread friend. Mein word! bud id has been a pleasure to meed you."

He swept his topee on to his head again, mopped the perspiration from his face, and descended slowly, leaving Dick with his head in a whirl, and feeling half inclined to laugh at the memory of this Dutchman's comical figure, his absurd attempts to be dignified, and his vast stock of self-assurance; and more than half

disposed to shed tears of joy and relief at the words of Mr. Pepson, at the offer which had been made to him, and at the prospect for the future. Then he sat down and did what many another youngster has done, who has been hurt and has been sick for a time. He fainted from sheer weakness and inability to withstand so much excitement.

"And that is all the thanks I get for allowing them to come," exclaimed the trim-bearded doctor, as he glared at Dick some minutes later. "It's all the work of that fat little Dutchman, of that I'm sure. He'd talk till any one was weary. Well, he shall not come again. You are to be a prisoner here, my boy, till you show signs that you are really mending. Fainted! Just fancy!"

He went off with a sniff and a smile, leaving Dick quite well again, but ready now to inflict the direst punishment upon himself for displaying such weakness.

"I could kick myself!" he exclaimed in disgust. "Here am I, in clover, as the doctor says, but till half an hour ago with starvation before me. I was on my beam ends, and did not know where to look for work or help. And here I am, with a post assured, and every prospect of earning a decent living. And the news upsets me. I'm a donkey! A fine thing if Mr. Pepson had seen me. A nice thing for him to know that his future manager might faint like a girl at the first critical moment. Pah! I wish some one would kick me!"

There was no one at hand to comply with his invitation, and presently the memory of his weakness wore

off and Dick fell asleep. A few days later he was far stronger, and when three weeks had passed he was himself again, his arm was out of the splints, and carried in a sling, while, when the doctor or Mr. Pepson were not about, he amused himself with using the hand and fingers.

"As well get accustomed to working the limb," he said to himself, with a smile. "I am sure that the expedition is dallying here till I am well, for that is just like Mr. Pepson. He is really grateful, and his liberality is wonderful. I must get this arm out of the sling as soon as possible."

Another week, in fact, brought the consent of the doctor, whereupon active preparations for the trip up-country were commenced. Meanwhile our hero had learned more of his new friends. Mr. Pepson, he found, was a wealthy trader from Sierra Leone, while Meinheer Van Somering was, as he had proudly stated, a native of Elmina. Born and bred there, he spoke the native tongue like his own, and knew the Gold Coast intimately. It was he who had learned of the goldfield on the Pra, and unable to purchase the concession himself, he had sent the information to Mr. Pepson. Dick learned to like the Dutchman immensely, to laugh at his comical appearance, his efforts towards dignity, his mighty ways with the natives, and his good temper. He was vastly amused at Meinheer's other side, at his obvious nervousness, and at his boastful ways and words.

"He is a good friend, and an amusing companion," said Mr. Pepson one day, "and if he has his little faults we must not complain. The truth is that he is

no fighter, Dick. When that is said, we have said sufficient. If we meet with trouble we may rely upon his seeking for and finding a secure retreat. We will not count on his help to protect the expedition. After all, it is only fair that the work should be divided. I shall command, and you will aid me. Meinheer is chief interpreter till you have made more acquaintance with the natives, and he will advise us about the mines and their working. Now let us go into the question of the expedition. You know the site of the mines?"

Dick had heard that it was somewhere on the river Pra, and said so.

"It is exactly ninety-four miles from here," said Mr. Pepson, "and is surrounded by dense bush. To get to it we ascend the river Pra till we reach a point on a level with the mines. Then we strike into the jungle. We shall take with us a few sets of hand winding gear, for at present the natives lower themselves into the shafts by their own efforts. The gear we have brought is simple, but it will answer well and save labour. Then we are taking guns and ammunition, rockets, grenades, and a small brass cannon. In addition there will be picks and spades, and iron boxes, in which the gold will be packed. As to conveyances, there is a large launch for our own use, and she will tow a couple of narrow native craft, and more if necessary. Once we have settled there, she will return with us, and will make periodical trips from the mines as soon as you have taken charge. She will be close to your hand, and if you meet with trouble you will know that there is a means of flight, and a way by which you can reach the coast. Now let us see to our personal outfit, for

remember, we may be months away, and we are going into parts which try the best of clothing."

They took their way into the town, for they had been chatting on the beach, where many of the stores for their expedition had been accumulated. Then they went by the road which led to the house which Dick's father had erected, and which had now passed into the keeping of the two partners. There they found a native tailor, with his wares already spread out on the verandah.

"He is a humble and patient individual," said Mr. Pepson, with a smile, "and he will have carried out my orders to the letter. These natives cannot always cut garments, and for bush work, as for any other, it is essential that one's clothes should fit easily and well, for otherwise in this hot climate they are apt to chafe. That being the case, I have for years made it a practice to get a stock of clothes when in England, and then allow a native to copy. You understand, he picks a suit to pieces, and makes use of the bits as patterns. He has a couple of suits here for us both. Yours is a copy of one which we found in your room. Come along. Give it a trial."

This slender, cadaverous-looking Englishman from Sierra Leone seemed to be able to think of everything. Time and again Dick had cause to wonder at his thoughtfulness, his care for others, and particularly for our hero; and long ago he had ceased to do more than murmur his thanks, for Mr. Pepson would arrest him at once with a warning finger and a friendly smile.

"What!" he would exclaim, "am I not to be allowed to do something for the comfort of one who saved my

life, and that, too, of our stout friend, Meinheer Van Somering? The world is indeed an ungrateful place if one is to receive such an act with only passing thanks, to reward it with a nod and a few polite words, and then in the rush which surrounds us to forget the deed and the one who gallantly performed it. Surely there is as much pleasure in remembering a brave act and a good friend as in anything. I hold that a gentleman never forgets his debts of gratitude, for they are indeed debts of honour, which can never be settled too completely."

And Dick would become silent, though now and again he would lamely protest that he had done nothing at all.

"That is your modesty, Dick," would be the answer. "I may say the same. I have done nothing more than any business man would do. You are to be my agent. I have a big stake in these mines, and I wish all to go well. Consequently, to avoid future loss, I equip my agent with the best and see to his welfare."

There was no arguing with such a man. He would smile that dry smile of his and would turn away. But Dick did not forget. If Mr. Pepson was grateful, so also was he, for he was indeed in clover. He saw work before him, hard work, too; for he had been given to understand that the post of agent would be no sinecure. Then he was now a partner with Mr. Pepson and the Dutchman in the store which his father had had for so many years. It had reopened already with a flourish. A manager had been appointed, and there were prospects of reviving the business, so that Dick might look forward to an income. Then he had

been credited with a good sum, which Mr. Pepson had insisted was the value of the partnership, while a further sum was to be paid every year in the way of rent for the residence. And now, as if that were not enough, here was a complete outfit. Dick donned the clothes which the native had prepared, and stepped into the centre of the verandah for Mr. Pepson's approval.

"You will do well," said the latter, when he had surveyed him critically. "The stuff is some which I imported specially. It is a dark cloth, as you observe, and, while being thin and light, it is strong, and to a certain extent waterproof. It will stand the thorns in the jungle, and better perhaps, should we meet with trouble, you will find that it does not make the wearer conspicuous. There is a green shade in it, and that will be difficult to detect against the foliage. Now the hat. That will do, too. It is made of the same material, and is just the thing for the jungle. A topee would be in the way, and besides, the sun does not penetrate very much, and, indeed, is often not to be seen. You will carry a topee in your kit for open spaces."

Three days later all was in readiness, and Dick found himself dressed in preparation for an early start. As he looked in his glass that morning, an hour before the sun rose above the steaming jungle and bush, he saw there a young fellow of medium height, dressed in a loose-fitting knickerbocker suit, with wide-awake hat to match. A leather belt was about his waist, and slung to it was a revolver, while on the other hip he carried a short sword, with a keen cutting edge on one side, the reverse being fashioned like a saw, for they

would have dense jungle to pass through, and such an implement was necessary. Beneath the loose coat he wore a light flannel shirt and turn-down collar, open at the neck. A pair of gaiters covered his calves, while his feet were clad in strong shooting boots. Altogether he looked a likely young fellow, and his smooth features and firm chin, disclosing a creditable amount of determination and obvious courage for one so young, set off his general appearance and led one to believe that the mining partners had not made such a bad choice after all.

"It's we who have made the mistake," said the Governor that morning to his secretary, as he bade farewell to the expedition. "We knew the lad was in difficulties and wanted a job, but we thought him too young. We let him kick his heels till he was miserable. We looked on while he was robbed and ruined, and we should have helped him to slip from the country had it not been for that plucky dash of his. I tell you, there are bad times coming. I could have found him useful as a police officer. We want a likely fellow, who can speak this Fanti tongue, to keep an eye open for the doings of the Elmina natives. This fellow would have done well. But there! we've lost him. It's always the way with those in authority. We hesitate. We know that our choice must be sanctioned by some man in office away at home, a man, mind you, who has never seen the object of our choice. That's red tape. It kills initiative. It has lost us a good fellow, and these men, Pepson and the Dutchman, have been too smart for us. They have jumped at him, and they've a real good fellow."

There was quite a commotion in Cape Coast Castle that morning. Many turned out to see the last of the expedition, and there was a cheer as the party embarked on a surf-boat, and put out to the steam launch lying just off the beach.

"Good luck! and watch the Ashantees," shouted one of the Government officials.

"Bring back plenty of gold," called out another.

"Good-bye and good luck!"

The words of encouragement and a last cheer came to them as they boarded the launch. There was a sharp order from Mr. Pepson, then the engines revolved. the propeller thrashed the water, and they were off, Dick and his friend watching the receding figures on the shore, while the sprightly Van Somering climbed to the highest point of the narrow deck and there held himself with head erect so that all might view him and admire.

"A great swell he is, too," laughed Mr. Pepson, as he and Dick turned from the shore. "His appearance alone should mean our security from attack."

And our hero was fain to agree. For the fat little Dutchman had exceeded any former attempt. True, he was dressed in the same loose clothing, made of the selfsame material as worn by his comrades. But his vanity had added embellishments to it. His shirt was red, a red which dazzled the eye, while the belt which surrrounded his ample waist was some five inches in width—strong enough, in fact, to bear the weight of two such Dutchmen, while it carried in front an enormous revolver and a dagger of like proportions, all of which made it appear as if Meinheer Van Somering

were a man of pugnacious disposition, and therefore to be avoided.

An hour later, a little while after the sun had risen over the jungle, the launch glided into the river at Elmina, and came to rest close to the mole.

"We will see first of all that our stores are here," said Mr. Pepson, as he leaped ashore. "Then we will move on without delay. Come with me, Dick, and go over the list of our possessions."

Everything had been sent on some few days before from the neighbourhood of Cape Coast Castle, where they had been landed from the steamer, and thanks to the careful foresight of Mr. Pepson, Dick found that three dugouts, of large proportions, lay close to the mole, roped firmly together, and in these were disposed the belongings of the expedition. In the bows of one was the brass gun, while there were sniders in all three and an ample supply of ammunition. In addition, half a dozen Fanti warriors sat on the thwarts waiting for the forward move.

"Hook on the launch," said Mr. Pepson. "Now, all aboard. Send her ahead, Johnnie."

Johnnie was the native boy who had been trained to man the engines of the launch, and he rejoiced in the name given. At the word he opened the steam throttle till the merest jet was fed to the cylinders, and gently drew ahead of the boats, slowly stretching out the hawser connecting them till it was taut. Then again there was a commotion at the end of the launch. The water was thrashed into foam, the ropes creaked and stretched, and finally the launch was under way, the three boats following gaily in the wake of the

plucky steamer. Mr. Pepson was at the wheel, and promptly put his helm over till they were heading for the very centre of the river.

"All clear here," he said, with a smile. "Now we make out for the sea, for this is not the river Pra. It lies a few miles to the west. Once there we shall not always have a wide, open stretch to steer through, particularly when we have ascended a few miles. Then, indeed, the fun will commence, for there are sure to be sandbanks and shallows, while I believe that crocodiles abound. In any case the river will narrow, and before very long the trees will come closer together and will shelter us from the sun. Send her full steam ahead, Johnnie."

By now they were feeling the swell at the mouth of the harbour of Elmina, and for some minutes all clung to the sides, for the light craft were tossed by the enormous surf running outside. When that was safely passed the steam launch turned to the west, and they went off along the coast, just as they had done that morning, watching the white sandy beach as they swept past it, the interminable forests beyond, and the blue haze hanging over the hills and mountains in the distance. Two hours later they reached the mouth of the river, and having approached it carefully, for mud banks lay off it in many directions, they shot into an open channel, and soon found themselves ascending the Pra, a broad river, there known as the Bustum.

"Higher up it is called the Pra," explained Mr. Pepson, "until it bifurcates. The branch flowing from the east is then called the Prahsu, while the one from the west is known as the river Offwin. We do not

ascend either of these. Our route takes us by a narrow tributary flowing into the Pra, and by that means we reach our destination. Now we can go full ahead."

Once more the throttle was opened to its full extent, and with the three boats in tow the launch steamed up into the heart of the country, with every prospect of covering many miles ere the darkness came and caused her to come to a stop.

CHAPTER IV

A Chase and a Fight

"In a little while the sun will be down," said Mr. Pepson, as he sprawled on the deck of the steam launch that evening. "Then it will be dark in half an hour or less, and we shall have to think of setting a watch. Meinheer will take the first one. From seven to nine, Meinheer. Dick will follow from that hour till midnight, and I shall take the watch from the first moment of the new day till the light comes. That will be about three o'clock. Now let us get our supper."

All day they had been steaming without adventure and without interruption up the broad sweep of the river Pra, seeing nothing to alarm them, and meeting with no difficulties. So far they had had plenty of water beneath their keels, and an ample space through which to steer. But there were signs that the river was narrowing, while all felt as if the forest was hemming them in.

"Zis is noding do whad we shall have soon," the Dutchman said, with a wave of his arm. "Zis forest —I have been for some miles into him before, mine friends—sdredches for a long, long way. Id is tick,

too. See how ze drees shood up close togeder. And watch below. Ze creepers are everywhere. Id would dake a day do cud a new road a mile long. Yes. Id is dense. Bud we shall have no drouble. Ze river dakes us do ze mine."

"For which I am only too thankful," added Mr. Pepson. "Our journey should occupy but three days, or at the most four. If we had to march through the forest we should have to take an army of Fanti labourers to cut a road. And then think of the fever."

"And of the machinery, too," exclaimed Dick.

"Yes, that is another point," agreed Mr. Pepson. "This country has been noted for its gold for many years. The Ashantis have carried on a trade since they became a nation, and there is no doubt that there are vast natural stores. You may ask, why have others not attempted to open mines before this? They have done so. The beach at Elmina and at Cape Coast Castle is strewn with rusting machinery, which has been landed with a purpose, and then left to rot and rust simply because of the difficulty of transport, and because of this forest. Luckily for us our mine is near the river. But here's supper. Sit down, Van Somering."

It was delightful to be out there in the open, even though the air hummed with myriads of mosquitoes. The launch and her three consorts lay moored out in the stream some hundred yards or less from the left bank of the river. About them, but for the buzz of the insects and the ripple of the water, all was still and silent. Not a beast seemed to be stirring, while even aboard the boats all had settled down to rest. Johnnie,

the stoker and driver, sat in the engine-well wiping his black hands after an inspection of the machinery, while the Fanti crew lay curled up in the bottom of the boats, two in each one, content with the world, waiting quietly for their evening meal. And now it was ready. With a broad grin Johnnie announced that the water boiled, while Dick, who had been superintending a dish of bacon which he had placed at the furnace door, sang out that it was done to a turn.

"Then I will make the coffee," cried Mr. Pepson. "Meinheer, see that the cloth is laid; and, Dick, steady with the bacon. We will start fair together."

The cloth consisted of a sheet of newspaper, a very ancient London daily, which the Dutchman spread out on the deck. Plates were of enamelled iron—the class of ware to stand half a dozen campaigns—while mugs were of the same hardy material, and were apt to be used for soup or coffee, water or good wine, just as circumstances dictated. It was all very jolly. This *al fresco* picnic delighted Dick, and he set-to at the meal with gusto, apologizing for his appetite.

"Id is goot! Id will make you grow sdoud, mine friend," grunted Meinheer, in the midst of consuming a rasher. "Id will make you grow so big zad ze natives will zink you a gread man. See how zey dread me, Meinheer Van Somering!"

He looked down at his ample proportions with evident satisfaction, and then completed his attack upon the rasher.

"Do-nighd all will be quied, mine friends, he went on. "I shall be on guard, and zese natives will not come. Perhaps lader zey will ask who we are. I will

speak wiz zem. There will be no difficulty. Anozer rasher, Meinheer Dick."

They ate till they were satisfied, for there was no reason to be careful with the rations, as they had an ample supply. The repast was ended with a second cup of steaming coffee, when the burly Dutchman produced a pipe of dimensions as ample as his own, and with a bowl which took quite a quantity of tobacco to fill it. Mr. Pepson lighted up a cigar, while Dick produced a briar pipe. Then for some minutes there was silence between them, while the darkness deepened, and the cigar and the pipes shone redder and redder.

At length it was dark, so dark on the surface of the river that nothing was visible, and Dick could hardly see the figures of his comrades. But that was only for a little while. Soon a big pale, African moon got up, and, riding clear of the jungle, flooded the course of the river, the left bank near which the boats lay, and the tree-tops and jungle along that side. On the far bank all was densely dark, and no eye could penetrate the deep shadow which cloaked the dark and forbidding forest which stretched unbroken beside the Pra.

"Bed!" called out Mr. Pepson, indulging in a yawn. "Meinheer, yours is the first watch. Wake Dick at nine. Good-night."

"Good nighd, mine friends. Sleeb well, for I shall protect you."

The Dutchman went aft to the tiny cabin, and fetched his rifle and a bag of cartridges. Then he seated himself upon the roof of the saloon, the rifle across his knees, and his pipe held firmly between his teeth.

Dick, too, was tired. It had been a long and interesting day, and he had watched the passing banks of the river till his eyes ached. Now he felt drowsy. He got up from the deck, stretched his arms and yawned, and then went off to the bows. A minute later he was wrapped in his blanket, which covered him from head to foot, his head was on a bag containing clothing, while his legs were stretched along the deck. Half an hour later he was asleep; all aboard, in fact, had turned in for their rest, save the solitary Dutchman, who still nursed his rifle, and puffed volumes of smoke from his lips without ceasing.

No wonder that Dick was charmed with this trip up-country. It appealed with all its force to a young fellow of his age. He revelled in the strangeness of the scenery, the dense, awe-inspiring forests, and all the teeming life hidden in their midst, and the silent, slow-flowing river. That evening, too, he had thought how beautiful it all was, and how peaceful. He had admired the cold rays of the moon, the sleepy boats lying beneath it, and the dark figures stretched out beneath the thwarts. He had listened, too, for a time to the music of the bush, which came now more loudly to his ear. There was the chatter of a regiment of monkeys, the call of night birds innumerable, and the droning hum of the insects. Ever and anon there came a deeper sound, as if from some beast wandering in search of its meal, while once, as he awoke and rose on his elbow, he caught sight of a graceful four-footed animal—a gazelle—tripping gently into the river to drink. After that he stretched out again, and, lulled by the droning sounds, slept deeply.

"What was that? Ah! that beast again!" he suddenly said in a whisper, as, some two hours later, he wakened with a start, only to close his eyes again, for he realized at once that the shriek he had heard was one which had often disturbed him at Cape Coast Castle—one which proceeded from the throat of a harmless forest animal.

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"

"An owl now," thought our hero, dreamily. "There it goes again, and quite close, too. Bother the bird!"

"Hoot! Hoot!"

This time Dick sat up on his elbow, and looked about him vainly for the bird. "Hoot! Hoot!" It came from his right, and he slowly turned his head in that direction. Then he did a curious thing. He lay flat of a sudden, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes vigorously.

"That's rummy!" he murmured beneath his breath. One of the boats has disappeared, and the others are moving away, and—what does it all mean?"

He rolled on to his back, lifted his head cautiously, and stared at the roof of the cabin. There was the figure of the Dutchman—immovable, looking fantastically huge, and sprawled out at full length. There was no pipe now to be seen, no smoke issued from his lips, while the rifle reposed beside him. Then came a deep, muffled snore. Meinheer Van Somering was asleep.

"Then there is some one near us," said Dick, swiftly. "Some one is stealing the boats. I must act with caution."

He had had experience of a midnight marauder

before, and he determined on this occasion not to be so easily beaten. He rose to his knees, and crawled along the deck till he reached the Dutchman. A moment later he had the rifle in his hands, and had drawn back the lock. Click! At the crisp sound some one stirred. A dusky figure stood up on one of the boats close by, and commenced to pole lustily. Then a second stood erect, and Dick could hear the splash as his pole fell into the water.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Bring that boat back, or I fire!"

He covered the nearest figure with his weapon, and waited, while his shout was followed immediately by a scuffling behind him, and by the almost instant appearance of Mr. Pepson. The latter seemed to take in the position at a glance. His eye detected the boat now so far away, the two remaining ones being poled by the two dark figures, and the huge, lumbering body of the Dutchman, still motionless and asleep.

"Shoot," he said, quietly.

Dick lifted the weapon again, sighted for his man, and fired. There was a loud shriek, and hardly had the echo of the shot died down when a splash told that the bullet had reached. But our hero was not content. He stretched for the bag, snatched another cartridge, and, having placed it in the rifle, covered the second man. However there was no need to fire, for a second splash told that the miscreant, warned by the fate of his comrade, had leaped overboard.

"What has happened?" demanded Mr. Pepson, sharply, but with no trace of excitement in his voice. "You were asleep, for it is barely half-past eight. You

found our watchman also asleep, and the boats departing. Did you see any one else?"

"No one," answered Dick, promptly. "But there must be one other at least. Look! There is a man poling the far boat."

"And he is too far away for a shot now. I might hit him, but the light is deceptive."

"Then why not follow sir?" exclaimed Dick. "Johnnie banked the fires, and in a few minutes there should be steam. That boat won't have a chance. We shall be up with her before she can get far."

"But not before our goods are stolen. No, we will give chase in one of the other boats," said Mr. Pepson, with decision. "Meinheer, bring the steamer along at once. Dick and I will follow."

Already he was throwing off the hawser which held the anchor, and, as he did so, Dick seized a pole. A few strokes took the launch close to the moving boats which had been so silently set adrift.

"Hold on, Johnnie, and you too, Meinheer," called out Mr. Pepson. "Now, Dick, get aboard with the gun, and I'll follow with another. We'll make one boat fast and pole the other down."

He ran along the deck of the launch, while Dick leaped into one of the native craft, two of which remained lashed side by side, and were floating away together. Suddenly a thought occurred to him. He sprang back into the launch, seized the bag of cartridges, and satisfying himself that it was well filled, slung it over his shoulder and again sprang into the native boat.

"Better get all ready for the pursuit," he said to

himself. "I'll set the two boats free, and toss the end of a rope attached to one to Meinheer. He can make it fast aft and follow with the boat in tow."

He fell upon the lashings with eagerness, and when Mr. Pepson appeared from the cabin, carrying a rifle, Dick had the two boats separated, and had tossed a rope attached to one to the Dutchman.

"Catch, Meinheer!" he shouted, for the burly Dutchman, since he had become fully awake, seemed to be endeavouring to collect his wits. The report of the rifle had brought him languidly to his feet, and now he stared at his two comrades in amazement, wholly unable to understand the need for such bustling, or for so much excitement.

"Bud whad is zis?" he demanded. "Is id ze middle of ze nighd, or—whad?"

"It means that you've been asleep when you ought to have been keeping watch," answered Mr. Pepson, bluntly. "Some thieves have cut our boats adrift, and one is being poled away. Don't stare, Meinheer. Take the rope Dick has thrown and make it fast. Then follow as soon as you have steam. Johnnie, get that fire to blaze."

He stepped into the native craft and took the pole which Dick offered him.

"Ready?" asked Dick.

A loud splash was the only answer, as Mr. Pepson let his pole fall into the water. Dick followed suit, and in a little while they were shooting down the river, which in these parts was sufficiently shallow to allow of poling.

"Keep her in near the bank, sir," sang out Dick.

"It gets deeper out there, and I've noticed that the fellow who is poling is sometimes unable to bottom. We are getting nearer already. Can we try a shot?"

"Wait," was the answer. "We have him in any case. He cannot escape us, and if we only keep him in sight he cannot take our goods. Keep on as we are till we are certain of a shot. If he tries to make to the opposite shore, where all is dense shadow, we will drop our poles and fire together."

Ten minutes later they had overhauled the runaway to some extent, and when half an hour had passed they judged that they were within easy distance.

"Try a shot," said Mr. Pepson. "Your young eyes are better than mine. "Don't hesitate, my lad. These fellows are rogues and would kill us without a thought. We must teach them a lesson."

Till that moment our hero would not have thought of hesitating, for he had felt the excitement of the chase, and he realized that he had to do with robbers who no doubt would have no scruples in killing him were he to come upon them. But just then the excitement had lessened somewhat. They were overhauling the chase without a doubt, and the figure poling the runaway boat looked so harmless there in the moonlight. Also he appeared to be unarmed. However, an order was an order, and his duty was plain. He dropped his pole into the bottom of the boat, picked up his rifle, and took a careful sight.

"Sight about the middle of his body—no higher," said Mr. Pepson. "That should find a mark."

Crash! The report of the rifle set the jungle ringing, while it reverberated along the still surface of the

river. Then came a shriek, followed by a shout from the shore. The native who poled the boat staggered and almost fell. Then he recovered himself, answered the shout from the shore, and in an instant had swung the boat's head round in that direction.

"We have him sure enough," cried Mr. Pepson, for the first time showing some trace of excitement. "He is making for the moonlit side, and cannot escape. At least, the boat and its freight are ours again. Drop the rifle and take to the pole."

They plunged their long poles into the water and sent the craft dancing after the other. But quick as they were, the boat in advance seemed to shoot across the moonlit stretch, and rapidly gained the bank. Again there was a shout, a dark figure ran out into the river, splashing the water loudly. Then a second followed, while the native who had been aboard threw his pole aside and staggered ashore.

"Heavily hit," gasped Mr. Pepson, for the exertion of poling was beginning to tell upon him. "But I was right. We have the boat, and, after all, what more do we want? Pole easily, Dick, and keep an eye on those fellows. Ah, they seem to have run for it. We have nothing to fear from them at least."

They pushed their craft gently into the shallows, till they were almost beneath the trees. Then, giving one lusty push, Dick stepped over the side and waded, dragging the boat after him. A minute later both were ashore, and were inspecting the other craft.

"We were just in time," said Mr. Pepson, in tones of the greatest satisfaction. "Another few minutes and they would have got clear away, and then good-

bye to the expedition, for a time at any rate. Make her fast, Dick, and keep a watch ashore."

Well was it for both of them that Dick did as he was told. Indeed, from the moment at which he had leaped into the river and commenced to wade, his suspicions had kept him alert with his eyes fixed upon the jungle and bush into which the three dark figures had disappeared. And now he was to find good cause for his wariness, for, of a sudden, as Mr. Pepson took the rope which was made fast to the bows of the runaway, and dragged it towards the craft in which they had undertaken the pursuit, a sharp sound came from the depths of the jungle. It was the snapping of a dried twig, a crisp and startling noise which caused both to look up suddenly.

"They are not so far away, I think," said Dick, in a low voice. "Wouldn't it be better if we moved away, sir? We are in the full blaze of the moon's rays here, while they are in the shadow. That's how that robber managed to get away from me down at the coast."

Hardly had the words left his lips when a single shot rang out, startling the silence, while the flash of the weapon lit up the immediate surroundings of the bush, and showed a dozen dark figures perhaps, all in the act of running forward. Dick noticed that in the twinkling of an eye, and heard also the click of the missile as it struck a hanging bough some feet in front of him. Then there was a dull thud, that thud which in the old days of large calibre rifles and heavy bullets told unmistakably of a hit. A second later a heavy splash and a sickening gurgle told the young English-

man the horrid truth. His comrade had been struck and had fallen into the shallow water.

It was a terrifying position, and for a second Dick stood rooted to the spot with consternation. Then his courage returned, and with the memory of that glimpse of charging figures which the flash of the rifle had given him, he stooped, clutched his fallen friend, and staggered to the boat. Half throwing him into it, he leaned across the thwarts, seized his rifle, and extracted a cartridge from the bag. He had still a moment to spare, for the patter of feet and the snap of many a twig told him that the enemy were not yet quite at hand.

"They are bound to kill us both here in the light," he thought, as the prominence of their position flashed across his brain. "I'll get into the shadow."

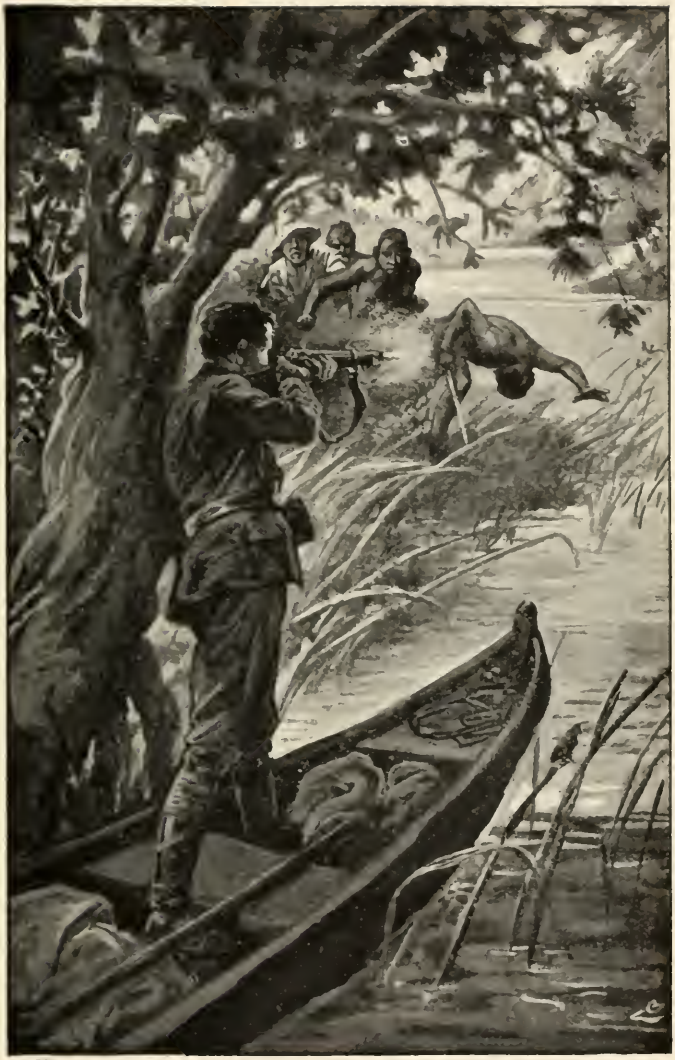
He had always been noted for his agility, and on this fine night our hero surpassed himself. Fear gave him strength, or else he could hardly have lifted his comrade as he had done. And now the same stimulus seemed to have sharpened his wits. He leaped at the gunwale of the boat and pushed the craft into deeper water. Then with a parting thrust of his leg he scrambled aboard, while the boat, impelled by the push he had given it, shot across the moonlit shadows, and burst its way into the deep shade of an overhanging tree. Dick clutched a bough and arrested its further progress. Then leaning his shoulder against the same friendly limb of the tree, he raised the rifle to his shoulder. There was a chorus of loud shouts, the splash of many feet, and in a second ten dusky figures burst into the full light of the moon and rushed

towards the tree which hid their quarry. Not till then did Dick fully realize his danger. He had imagined till now that his foes were natives from the river-banks, thieves who had come out to rob the expedition during the night. But there was one amongst the group charging down upon him who showed that he was mistaken. There was no chance of his being in error, for the brilliant moon lit the scene too well, and showed before him the half-caste James Langdon, who had so recently fled from the coast, carrying Dick's store of gold with him.

"Then he at least shall suffer now, whatever happens to the others," exclaimed our hero. Lifting his weapon again he covered the half-caste, waited till he felt sure of his aim, and pressed the trigger. Once again there was a shout, and one of the unfortunate natives who aided the rascally half-caste, leaped high into the air to fall next instant with a splash into the water.

"Rush! He is now unarmed! Cut the dog to pieces!" shouted James Langdon.

There was an ugly gleam in the eyes of the robbers as they heard the shout, and slight though Dick's knowledge was of the language of these Fantis, he recognized the meaning of the words. Quick as thought he threw his weapon down and drew his revolver. They were close to the tree now, and nothing but the darkness baffled them. But there was their disadvantage, and Dick made the most of it. Singling out the foremost he fired full in his face, and then, ere the report died down, pulled heavily on the bough and dragged himself and the native boat still farther into



"HE FELL WITH A CRASH INTO THE RIVER"

the shadow. A second later the weapon spoke again, and another of the miscreants fell. But still their commander urged them on.

"Think of the rifles and other goods," he shouted. "There is only one between you and the prize, and he is only a boy. Rush him! Cut him to the chin! Stand aside and I will lead you. Now, are all ready?"

He turned to look at his men, and waved a native sword overhead to encourage them. Then he peered into the dense shadow and was in the very act of leading a final charge when there was a sudden and unexpected interruption. A single shot rang out from the river, while one of the enemy fell on his face in the water and disappeared from sight.

"Ahoy! Mine friends! Are you zere?" came in the guttural tones of the Dutchman.

"Fire on them," shouted Dick, levelling his revolver again and sending a shot into the group. Fire, Meinheer! Drive them off. Mr. Pepson is badly wounded."

An instant later the nose of the steam launch shot into view, some fifty yards from the bank, and Dick caught a glimpse between the leaves of the big tree which sheltered him of the anxious face of Johnnie, peering from over the engine-well, and of the portly figure of the Dutchman, a portion of which was hidden by the cabin aft. He stood there prominent in the rays of the moon, a rifle in his hands, and his short sword attached to his side. Then, as his eye lit again on the group of natives, he lifted the weapon, and hardly had the report of Dick's revolver died down when there was a flash, and the half-caste who had formerly robbed our hero, and who had now made such

an artful attack upon the boats of the expedition, clapped his hand to his thigh and gave vent to a loud bellow. Then he turned and fired a shot at the Dutchman, a shot which flew past in the air, screaming and hissing towards the opposite bank of the river. But long before it could have reached that destination the robber had swung round on his heel, and with a shout of defiance had raced for the shadows. After him Dick sent the remainder of his magazine, while Meinheer Van Somering, when he had recovered from the consternation into which the shriek of the shot had thrown him, followed his example, much to our hero's trepidation, for the bullets flew on either hand, cutting a shower of leaves from the trees.

"Steady, Meinheer!" he shouted. "You will be hitting us soon. We are here under the tree. I had to seek shelter from the light, for they would have picked us off easily. Bring the launch in and I will wade out to you. I fear that Mr. Pepson is seriously hurt."

Leaping overboard he pushed the boat clear of the tree and of the shadow, and soon had it alongside the launch, for the latter steamed gently into the shallows. Then the leader of the expedition was lifted aboard, the two boats were made fast to the stern of the steamer, and they pushed out into the stream.

"Better make for the far shore," said Dick. "Then we shall not be treated to long shots."

"Bud zese wicked robbers, Meinheer," gasped the Dutchman. "Shall we led zem go free? Shall zey escape?"

"We can do nothing more," was Dick's answer, given with decision. "They are gone long ago. The

forest has swallowed those who are alive. Let them run, Meinheer, and do not trouble any more about them at the present time. To-morrow, when there is light, we will visit the bank again and see what has happened to them. For the moment let us look to Mr. Pepson. Now, Johnnie, steer us for the far side, and when you reach the shadow, come to a stop just inside its edge. Whatever you do, keep steam up, and have the propeller just moving, so that we shall not be drifted down-stream. Now we will light the lamp and see to our friend."

Without hesitation he took the lead, now that Mr. Pepson was incapacitated, for he realized in a moment that Meinheer Van Somering was not to be relied on in such an emergency. Indeed, he had been struck with amazement at the boldness already displayed by his stout friend, for who would have expected, knowing him as they did, that he would have dared to stand there so conspicuously on the deck of the launch and fire upon the robbers? Meinheer Van Somering had gone up in Dick's estimation. He had proved that he had some store of courage after all. But he lacked self-control. At this moment when he should have been cool and thoughtful, for the danger had passed, he was tramping the deck from end to end, causing the stout launch to heel to either side. And every minute he would halt and stare at the forest which had just been left. At such moments his fist would close round his rifle, while his finger would feel for the trigger.

"Mein word!" he cried. "Bud zey would have killed us! Zey were robbers and murderers. Ah! I shod two of zem. Meinheer Dick, you saw me do id."

"I saw," growled our hero, "but we can talk of that later. Come and help with the lamp. Put your rifle down and leave the robbers to take care of themselves. Come, Meinheer, our comrade may be bleeding to death."

There was a tone of command now in his voice, and at the sound Meinheer dropped his weapon and came aft. Already Dick had been able to find the lamp, and just as the Dutchman reached him he struck a match and lit the wick of the candle.

"Hold the lamp, please," he said. "Higher, so that I can get a good view. Now, what has happened? I heard the bullet strike heavily. Ah! Thank heaven! He is alive."

"And zere, I zink, is ze wound. See, Meinheer Dick, zere is blood. Oh, mine poor friend! How he has been hurd!"

"Higher!" commanded Dick, as the Dutchman, forgetful of his request, lowered the lamp. "That is right. Keep it there, please, till I have ripped the coat open. Ah, here is another wound in the head. That will account for his being insensible."

Together, the Dutchman's tendency to undue excitement arrested by the coolness displayed by his young companion, they cut the shoulder of the coat away and inspected the wound. Then they went in search of bandages and dressings, for the thoughtful Mr. Pepson had included a cabinet of drugs and instruments in the outfit of the expedition. Neither of the two friends who looked to the wounds had had previous experience, but common sense helped them, while the lamp allowed them to read the clearly printed directions contained in

the cabinet. They bathed the wounds in the shoulder and the scalp, and applied the dressings. Then they put the arm in a sling, and placed it across the wounded man's chest.

"He is coming to," said Dick, after a while. "We will give him a few drops of water. Hold his head so, Meinheer. Now I will pour a little between his lips."

An hour later their friend was conscious again, and was sitting up with his back leaning against the gunwale.

"I feel dizzy and my head aches dreadfully," he said, with a plucky smile. "Look in the cabinet, Dick, and you will find something there which will quiet me. Then perhaps I shall get to sleep and be myself to-morrow. Never fear, my friends. The wounds are not so serious, for the gash in my shoulder is merely a flesh wound, and the bone is quite uninjured. As to the scalp wound, I am a fortunate man. I think that the bullet must have glanced from a bough, for I heard a sound just before I was struck. Then it hit my shoulder, and as it flew on just touched my head, glancing from the bone, and hitting me hard enough to stun me. By the way, I was standing in the water. I suppose Dick pulled me out again? That is another debt I owe him."

"You ought to keep quiet," was our hero's answer, as he arrived with a bottle and a glass in his hand. "Here we are, sir. A teaspoonful in a little water, and then silence. There, drink it up, and sleep. We will look to the safety of the boats."

He held the glass to Mr. Pepson's lips and watched as he feebly drained it, for there was little doubt that

the leader was sadly injured, and only his pluck had allowed him to chatter at all. However, he obediently drank the mixture, and seemed to be glad to settle down on the rug which the Dutchman produced. Another rug was thrown over him, a cushion placed under the wounded limb, and the lamp removed from before his eyes. Dick and Meinheer retired to the far end of the launch and stood there chatting in whispers, till, in less than half an hour, the deep breathing of the sufferer told that he was asleep.

All this while the launch, with the boats trailing out behind her, lay in the dense shadow of the river-bank, her propeller barely moving, so that she just held her place in the river. Close at hand could be heard the murmur of the leaves in the forest, the chatter of monkeys, and the call of night birds, arrested a little while ago by the reports of the rifles. And on the other side a fine moonlit vista was displayed. The surface of the river Pra lay spread out in the rays of the pale African orb, while the water rippled and slid down toward the sea, seeming to be particularly peaceful on this lovely night. Looking at its shining surface, and at the wonderful lights and shadows beyond scattered along the face of the jungle, one almost wondered whether the coming of the robbers were not after all a dream. Whether murder and theft had, in fact, been attempted, and whether away on that far shore there actually lay the dark forms of the attacking natives who had lost their lives in the bold and dastardly attempt. But there could be no doubt. As Dick Stapleton stood in his shirt sleeves upon the roof of the tiny cabin, rifle in hand, and cartridge bag about

his sturdy shoulders, his eager eyes searched every shadow, and followed every line of river and forest which was illuminated. Suddenly his arm shot out. His figure became rigid, while his finger pointed across the water.

"There is one of the rascals, at any rate," he said. "He has come to look to his comrades, and no doubt thinks that we are far away by now. See, Meinheer, I could pick him off from here as if he were a bird, and I should be justified. But that's not the sort of game I like to play. They're beaten. They've had a lesson, and I fancy Master James Langdon will remember it. As for us, I should say that we have had a very narrow escape."

There was a grunt of approval and acquiescence from Van Somering, a puff of smoke proceeded from his lips, and he growled out a reply.

"Mein friend," he said, in condescending tones, "we are conquerors, is id nod so? Zen zere is no need to kill more of zese men. Led zem go peacefully while we make ze mosd of ze nighd which remains. Meinheer, id is near ze hour of midnighd. Your wadch should commence now. I will sleeb, for I am weary."

He seemed to have forgotten the fact that it was his drowsiness which had almost brought disaster to the expedition, and that Dick's watch should have commenced at nine and ended at twelve. With a grunt he rolled along the deck, leaving our hero in command of the situation.

CHAPTER V

A Question of Importance

Dick shivered and fidgeted. He tapped the deck gently with his toe, and then got up and clambered to the roof of the tiny cabin again, for he was ill at ease. It was not the chill air of the early morning which made his blood run cold, nor the damp mist which rose on every side from river and jungle, from the stagnant pools lying amidst the roots of giant trees and boulders, and from the mossy margins of the stream, where the eddies played, and the current was still. It was neither of these, for there was no chill in the heart of this African country. The morning was almost as stiflingly hot as the night had been, though the green of the leaves, and the shimmer of the river surface as it met his eye through the thin mist, looked cool and refreshing. Dick was uneasy in his mind. As he had sat the hours of darkness through his thoughts had been busy. Remorse, anguish, bitter self-condemnation had come in turn to torture his mind, and now, as the darkness waned and the light increased, he was constantly on the move, searching the river-bank on the far side.

"There! Yes, that is the tree," he said, as he pointed to the bush beyond. "I can recognize it, and be-

neath it lie those poor fellows. I killed them! They are stretched out there cold and stiff, those whom the water does not cover. Oh, it is awful to think about."

He wrung his hands, while there was a look of anguish on his usually jolly face. Had James Langdon, the rascal who had made the attack in the night which had just passed, been able to see him he would have laughed, for this sturdy young Englishman, looking so strong and active on this early morning, would hardly have dared to lift his rifle. He was suffering the torment of mind which has come to many a thousand young warriors before him. Not because he wished it, but owing to pure accident, he had the blood of fellow beings on his hands. He had killed men. He had seen them fall. He remembered the horrid gurgling sound made by the unhappy wretch who had fallen into the water and sunk to the mud. The hideous noise had haunted him the night through, so that he was unmanned and shivering. His fists were clenched, and his teeth held tight together.

"I killed them," he murmured.

"And they have themselves to thank," said a voice at his elbow. "So that's how the wind blows! Our gallant young agent would rather fall himself and see his comrades massacred than fire on rascals who were ready to murder all. No! No, I did not mean that, my lad. But—look here!"

It was Mr. Pepson, standing there on the deck as erect as ever, as if he had received no wound, though the bandages about his head and his shoulder and the blood-stains upon them, showed that he undoubtedly had. But Dick had begun to discover some unsus-

pected points about this employer of his, and had come to the conclusion that he was possessed of no ordinary pluck and go, though he showed it in his own quiet and unassuming manner, and, in addition, that thin and cadaverous though he seemed to be, yet this trader from Sierra Leone was as hard as nails. He stared at him in amazement, and then flushed at his words.

"Why, you ought to be wrapped in your rug!" he exclaimed sharply. "You are hurt, and need a little nursing."

"A mere scratch—a flea-bite, I assure you. I have had many worse before this, as you may learn when I tell you a little of my life's history. But speaking of rugs. That's what you want, my lad, and a good talking-to besides. Now, listen to me, Dick. I don't blame you, nor do I smile at your thoughts and feelings, for every decent fellow has them. I remember a ruffian who thought to rob me in South America, many years ago. Yes, I was a youngster little older than you are. I shot him dead, and lay down beside him through the night, because that was the safest place. When the sun came up and showed me that I was alone and that there was no more trouble to fear, I looked at that poor fellow. He was lying on his back, his legs curled up beneath him, and his hands stretched out as if he were asleep. But his white face and the pool beside him told me the awful truth. I bolted. I ran away, Dick. I felt like a murderer, and for days wondered whether I should be tracked. Then I saw the other side. A rancher took me in hand, just as I am doing with you, and he made me

see the right side. Why, bless me, the world is filled with honest people and with rogues, and the latter prey upon their fellows. Are the honest men to put up with robbery and violence? Did you agree so easily to James Langdon's taking your gold? Did you? Come, answer the question."

Dick was cornered, and began to see the other side of the matter. The sun was coming up, too, and the damp mist was already beginning to disappear. Our surroundings often have an immense effect upon the brightness or otherwise of our thoughts, and our hero, usually so jolly and so genial, had felt the depression common to many who keep watch alone during the dark hours after an action.

"Of course I didn't," he answered. "I tried to shoot him, just as I did last night, and he would have richly deserved his fate."

"Quite so. And these rascals last night deserved theirs, without a doubt. It happened that you were the one to stand between them and their wishes, and they did their utmost to remove you. Theirs was might against right, and right prevailed. They paid the penalty, and here are you grieving because all has happened as it should. Come. No more of this nonsense! Tell me about the action, for, remember, after the moment when we set foot ashore, I know nothing, save that I found myself aboard this launch, with you and Meinheer staring into my face. That reminds me. Where is our fine friend? A precious mess his laziness got us into last night."

"Turned in and snoring," said Dick. "Listen!"

Above the ripple of the water and the sough of the

wind in the trees the sounds proceeding from the nose of the Dutchman could be distinctly heard.

"He must have his sleep," laughed Mr. Pepson. "Did I not tell you that we must needs rely upon ourselves for protection? He is made for commerce, not for warfare."

"And yet he did well last night. I'll tell you what happened."

They sat down on the tiny roof while Dick told how the bullet had struck his friend, and how the flash had showed him a dozen men rushing down upon them.

"That was an awkward position," interrupted his friend. "I understand that I was lying in the water. Covered, in fact?"

There was a queer little smile on his lips, and he looked swiftly into Dick's honest and open face.

"Yes. You had gone below the surface. I was stunned by the mishap. I thought it was all up with us."

"With me, you mean. You could have bolted. The boat was close at hand."

Dick flushed to the roots of his hair, and tore his hat from his head as if the weight troubled him. He stared at Mr. Pepson in amazement, and then, seeing the smile, smiled back at him.

"You are chaffing me," he said. "Trying to humbug me. You know well enough that no decent fellow would do that. You wouldn't. I wasn't going to desert a comrade who was down and helpless, particularly when there were such ruffians about. So I set to work as quickly as possible."

"You made up your mind to see the business through?"

"Yes. I was staggered at first. Then I caught you up, not too gently, I fear, and dumped you into the boat. After that I pushed her out and shoved off into the shadow of the trees."

"Why? What was your reason?"

Mr. Pepson was like an inquisitor. He still smiled the same little smile, and still treated his agent to an occasional flash of his brilliant eyes, as if he would probe him to the utmost depth.

"My reason? Oh, we were in the light, you see. The moon was up, and the beggars could pot us easily. They had guns, remember, else you would not have been hit. I reckoned—all of a sudden—I don't know how it was, quite—that we should be safer there, and so into the shadow I went. Then they occupied our position. I could see to shoot, while they were bothered. Still, they made a fine rush, and things began to look ugly when the launch came into view. Our friend showed his mettle, for he fired at once, and his shot practically ended the engagement. Then we steamed off, and, and——"

"And here we are. And I owe you a life again, Master Dick. Very good. No, I won't say a word more, save that you tackled the task well. It was an ugly position and you seem to have chosen the only way out. I'm glad, too, that Meinheer put a spoke in their wheel. Now do me the favour of dressing these wounds again, and then we will breakfast. Get the bandages and a looking-glass, for then I shall be able

to see the hurts myself, and give an opinion. You see, I am a bit of a surgeon."

At this moment the blanket beneath which the ample figure of the Dutchman was shrouded stirred and was thrown back, and very soon, yawning and stretching his arms, Meinheer came along the deck. By then Dick had the bandages and fresh dressings, as well as a bowl of water, drawn from the river, and some clean linen to act as a sponge. How different, how light-hearted he looked, for, thanks to his chat with Mr. Pepson, and to the other's common sense, all his worries were dispelled, and he saw things with an eye which was not jaundiced. He had, in fact, reached the stage at which others in a similar position had arrived before. He could see that killing was not a joyous trade, that no ordinary human being lightly undertook it, and only when circumstances made it imperative that he should act so as to protect his own life and that of his friend. Then there was no blame to be attached to the one who had shed the blood of his fellow, so long as he was not a wanton aggressor.

"Here we are," he called out as he came along. "Good day, Meinheer. Hold the bowl, please, while I get the bandages undone. Ah, here's the pin. Now, sit up, sir. That's right. We'll have it done in a jiffy."

Very carefully and skilfully he unwrapped the bandages, and presently the dressing was removed from the shoulder. Mr. Pepson lifted the glass, arranged it so that he could obtain a clear view, and then grunted.

"Humph!" he said, with one of his inscrutable

smiles. "A mere scratch. Take the probe, Dick. Now dip it into that other bowl which has the carbolic in it. That's the way. Gently put it into the wound. No. Don't be nervous. I'll soon shout if it hurts. Press gently towards the other place where the bullet came out. Hah! A mere flesh wound, barely an inch deep. Not even that. I'm lucky! The shoulder is scarcely stiff, and a little rest in a sling will put it right in a week. A schoolboy would laugh at it. Put on fresh dressings and we'll inspect the head. Lucky that I'm such a surgeon!"

He was as cheery as possible, and thanks to his lightheartedness his friends, who had been looking on and helping in the task with some misgivings, began to feel that their comrade was, after all, not so badly hurt.

"I tell you that it was only the crack on my skull that mattered," persisted Mr. Pepson. "The bullet slipped through my shoulder, a mere wound of the cuticle, and then happened to glance against my scalp and skull. A man can't stand that. It knocks him stupid. That's why I fell, and that's why our young friend had to help me. But it doesn't explain why he —a mere youngster—pulled me through so well, and why he stuck to me when many another would have bolted to save his own skin. Heh? What did you say, Meinheer?"

"Zat we hab a drasure. Zat Meinheer Dick will be a gread man one of zese days. When he is big like me, when he has grown fine and dall, and, and—ah, yes, sdoud, you call him; yes, when he is sdoud, then he will be one gread, fine man. And he is brave!

Yes, I see zad with half one eye, for a brave man knows when he meeds one of ze same."

"Quite so, Meinheer," answered Mr. Pepson, dryly. "Which reminds me. Dick says that you fired in the nick of time, and turned the tide of the battle. It was a good shot. You did well, and Johnnie also, to bring up the launch just then. But stand aside a little and give me the glass. Hah! Looks nasty, doesn't it, Dick," he went on, as the wound on his scalp was exposed, and he noticed our hero wince and turn a little pale at the sight. "Come, come! Looks are the worst part of it. Bathe the wound and cover it again. An Irishman would not give it a second thought. I haven't even a headache."

He rose to his feet when the dressing was completed, and walked up and down the deck, looking perhaps a little more sallow than usual. But his spirits were not in the least damped or downcast. Indeed, his two companions had yet to learn that their leader was, in his quiet way, a remarkable man. As hard as nails, as Dick had already observed, cool and courageous, and possessed of a dogged nature which defied the utmost fatigue, which laughed, or rather smiled only, at danger, and which made light of any wound. Meanwhile, Dick and Johnnie were engaged at the furnace door, and presently the aroma of coffee came to the nostrils of the leader and the Dutchman, causing the latter to turn an eager and expectant gaze in that direction.

"By Jobe!" he cried, "bud zad is a scend zad is goot, yes, ver goot. Whad shall we ead zis day?"

His question was answered almost at once, for Johnnie came along the deck bearing a steaming dish,

Dick following with the coffee and biscuit. The newspaper was again spread on the roof of the cabin, and all set to work with eagerness.

"And now for future movements. We are a day's journey from the mouth of the river, and three from the mine," said Mr. Pepson. "The question is whether we should push on alone as we are, or whether we should return. There is no doubt that all our Fanti men were in league with these robbers, and left us at the first opportunity."

"And would do the same again," Dick ventured. "If we returned for a second crew, who is to guarantee that they will not behave in a similar manner?"

"That is the very point. We should run that danger. What are your views about this attack during the night?"

He swung round on his elbow and looked keenly at our hero.

"You saw them," he said. "This precious rascal nearly shot you. How much has he had to do with the matter?"

"More than any one, I think," was Dick's answer. "I believe him to be a thorough rogue, and in league with the Ashantis. Inquiries which I made at Cape Coast Castle convinced me that he had been engaged on many occasions in running guns and ammunition to the coast, and sending them up-country. Well, we have heard that there is trouble brewing. The natives at Elmina are in almost open insurrection. Murders have been committed under the eyes of the garrison, and a few white men carried off. In addition, there are tidings that parties of Ashanti warriors are in the

neighborhood of the Pra. It is my opinion that this James Langdon is their spy, that he is watching for them and sending news of the doings at Elmina and Cape Coast Castle to King Koffee. That would have brought him tidings of our expedition, for all in Elmina and along the coast knew of our intentions——"

"While the king of the Ashantis had given us the concession, and had promised that we should be protected," interposed Mr. Pepson. "Not that I will trust his sable majesty's word. The best protection that we can have will be our rifles. But I interrupted. You think——?"

"That this James Langdon is a spy, and that while engaged in that work he has time to see to other matters. The cargo we carry is valuable. If he could have taken the boats the expedition would have been ruined, and we should have had to return. Then, too, we do not know how much more ambitious the scheme of last night's attack may have been. They may have arranged to steal the boats and make sure of their prize, then to return and cut our throats. There were sufficient of them, and I fancy that what James Langdon would willingly do, the others would also carry out."

"Precisely. They would hack us all to pieces. Never you hesitate again to shoot, my lad. Where such rascals have to be dealt with it is as well to press a trigger without delay, remembering that the man who hesitates very often is killed before he has another chance. And you think that this ruffian has been on the lookout for us, and that we are not only fortunate in having our goods secure, but also in having our

lives? I believe it. I think the fellow would willingly have had a little private revenge with his booty. He has his knife in you, Dick, because you were the first to discover him, and he will not be more friendly disposed to us, for we are whites, and he is an outcast. To return to the subject of Elmina. I heard about the natives. Perhaps Meinheer can tell us more."

"Zey are pigs, I dell you. Mein word! Bud do you know zis, mine ver good friend? Zese blacks were once servands. Zey would run, and quick, when ze order was give. Now—now zere is no ordering zem. Zed do nod move. Zey glare ad me, ad me, Meinheer Van Somering. Zey used to sdand and shake, so"—the burly Dutchman let his knees knock together, while he trembled till his fat cheeks quivered —"ver good, now zey laugh, yes zey laugh and run away."

"All of which points to disaffection and probable mutiny," said Mr. Pepson. "Then it is clear that a second crew from Elmina would be worse than useless. We shall have dangers to face. We can well do that alone."

"While I am sure that we can manage the launch and the boats, particularly if we tie up before it is dark, and then change our position once the night has fallen."

"A brilliant idea, Dick, and we will carry it out. Once at the stockade I shall have no fear, for the men are Ashanti gold-diggers, who are not much given to fighting. There are a dozen of them, and I think their loyalty can be controlled by the prospect of gold. You see, they are paid a percentage of what they re-

cover from the soil. Yes, we will push on up-stream and avoid another attack. If there is a moon again we will keep on during the night. Now about those fellows over there. We must go across and see how many are killed, and if any are still living. Meinheer, what do you say?"

The Dutchman did not reply hastily, for he was considering the danger of such an expedition. However, in his heart of hearts, Meinheer was a humane man when his fears were quieted, and he argued that here there could be no danger.

"Good. We will go, Meinheer," he said. "Ze sooner ze bedder."

"And as I am the lightest and perhaps the most active, I will land," added Dick. "Then, in case of an attack, you two can cover me with your rifles. There is no trusting these rascals, particularly when James Langdon commands them."

A few minutes later the remains of the breakfast had been cleared away, and while the trio smoked their pipes and chatted, Johnnie stoked the furnace, throwing coal upon it till a column of smoke issued from the funnel. Soon the hiss of steam from the escape told that the launch was ready for a move, and at once Mr. Pepson stepped to the tiller.

"We'll leave our boats anchored over here," he said, "for it would never do to have them over on the far shore and run the risk of attack. In the confusion, if there were need to escape, they would hamper us, and would perhaps be lost. Make them fast together, Dick, and we'll leave Johnnie in charge."

Another two minutes saw the launch steaming away

from beneath the trees on the eastern side of the Pra, and presently her nose was pushing its way through the reeds and oziers which cropped up here and there on the far side.

Mr. Pepson still held the tiller, a rifle beside him, and a cigar between his lips. The bulky form of the Dutchman was stretched out on the deck behind the tiny cabin. His rifle was at his shoulder, and he surveyed the jungle eagerly, treating every dark patch and shadow to a fierce scowl which boded ill for the man who might be lurking there. His finger on such occasions would go to the trigger of his snider till Dick fidgeted and felt uncomfortable, for he was not far from the line of fire. He lay in the bows, a light bamboo in his hands, with which he every now and again sounded the bed of the river to make sure that there was sufficient water. A few minutes' gliding along in the shadows brought them to the spot where the action of the previous night had taken place, a spot instantly recognized by the figures lying about it. For stretched in the sun were the victims of Dick's fire, as yet undiscovered by the river alligators. Dick shuddered, and transferred his gaze to the bush. Then, remembering Mr. Pepson's words, he looked again. One poor wretch lay face down in the water, his body already almost covered with drifting mud, while his feet protruded on to the land. Close to him lay a second, still and dark, his limbs stretched to their fullest extent, while some paces away were three more of the attackers, all stark and dead.

"The reward of rascality," cried Mr. Pepson. "A horrid sight, my friends; but then we might have been

in their place, and war and battles are always horrid. How's the depth, Dick? Can you get ashore?"

For answer our hero tried the sounding with his stick again, and then stood up. Taking his rifle he dropped lightly into the water and waded ashore. Then he went to the figures lying about. They were all undoubtedly dead, and a glance satisfied him of that fact. At once he went on towards the bush, which at this point receded somewhat from the river, and presently something attracted his eye. It was a path leading into the forest, a path freshly broken and trodden, the one, no doubt, by which the robbers had fled.

"Leave it," shouted Mr. Pepson. "You would be in the middle of the jungle, where all is dark, and we could not help you. Come back. We have learned all that we desired. There are five killed here, and one whom you shot in the first boat. But one moment. Do any of these fellows belong to our runaway crew?"

Dick retraced his steps slowly, and reluctantly looked at the bodies again. There was not the slightest doubt that they were the very men who had come from Elmina—all, in fact, save one, whose face was strange.

"Then James Langdon had others with him," thought Dick. "Somehow, I don't know why, I feel misgivings about that man. His memory haunts me. What if he attacked us again!"

What if our hero had known that the ruffian whose name he mentioned was at that very moment within little more than a stone's-throw! That James Langdon had come down to the river-bank that morning, having left his lair in the forest just as the launch steamed away from her anchorage of the previous

night! That he had watched with the eagerness and stealth of a fox, and had rubbed his hands with delight as he saw the son of the master he had robbed drop into the water! For this half-caste forgot that he himself was to blame for the existence which he now led, for the discomforts which he had now to put up with. He placed all the blame on Dick's shoulders.

"There he is!" he growled, as Dick waded towards the shore. "But for his coming to the coast I should have been able to remain there, still unsuspected, and there, living in a good house, I could still have done this work for King Koffee. And I could have gained riches more quickly. But we shall see. Ah! he is ashore. If he steps nearer I will shoot him like a bird."

He crouched in the underwood, while his hand went to the pouch at his waist. A growl of anger and disgust escaped him, for the revolver which he had carried was not there. He had no weapon but a large sheath-knife, which he carried at his hip.

"It will do as well, and it is silent," he said to himself. "He is coming. The young fool will walk into the trap, and this time I will not be flurried. He shall come on without a suspicion, and when he has passed me I will leap on his back and there will be an end of the matter."

His ferrety eyes gleamed with malice. He spat on the hand which was to hold the knife, and then gripped it with all his strength. His limbs arranged themselves till the man was poised on the tips of his toes and fingers, till he sat crouched in a position to spring upon the back of his unsuspecting foe. Then came the

voice of the leader. Dick stared into the jungle till the half-caste thought he must be seen. Then he retired to the launch, inspected the faces of the slain, and went aboard.

"My luck!" growled James Langdon. "But the chance will come again. Oh, yes, my friend, Dick Stapleton, you will be sorry one of these days. As for the men who have engaged you as their agent, they are fools. It would be better for them if they had never met you."

He glared at the launch and her passengers as she steamed away, and still continued to stare at them till they reached the far side of the Pra; for a thought had struck this ruffian.

"Why not?" he asked himself. "They will be alone. There will be gold in plenty. Why should I not have my share of that or take all that they possess? If I have failed this time I shall succeed at the next attempt."

The thought pleased him immensely, for his face lightened, the scowl left his forehead, and for a moment James Langdon looked as if he were not the villain he had proved himself to be. But he would not have deceived Dick Stapleton. Had our hero been able to see him there in the bush, he would have suspected the mischief that was brewing, and the misgivings which now filled his mind would have been vastly increased. As it was, he and his friends went on their way up the river, and their adventure of the night almost forgotten in the passing scenes, and in anticipation of the pleasures before them.

CHAPTER VI

Forest Dangers

Two days passed without event as the steam launch made her way up the river Pra, and each day the stream narrowed. Indeed, the expedition was approaching the bifurcation of the river, and so far had not come upon the tributary which they were to ascend.

"We shall know it by two enormous cotton trees, one of which has fallen against the other," sang out Mr. Pepson that evening, as the anchor was dropped, and the trio sat down to their meal. "Remember, two cotton trees, one of which is supported by its fellow. Is that not the description, Meinheer?"

"Good. Id is zad. I have never seen him, bud I know. Meinheer Dick shall hear how I come do find zis place. A native run away to Elmina and draw a map in ze sand wiz his doe. He said, 'Over zere, plendy of gold, and mines close do ze riber.'"

"And you brought the tale to me," interrupted Mr. Pepson, "with the result that we sent an agent, and after getting his report we obtained a concession, and set native gold-diggers to work. That's the secret of this mine, Dick. It's so close to the river that one can take machinery there, and the winding gear we have

brought, though small, will be sufficient to tell us whether it is worth our while to bring more. Transport is the main difficulty in this country, and if we have a river, why——"

"Zere is moch gold for all," burst in Meinheer. "Wid a riber we can reach ze mine and can dake our goods. Zen ze ground is clear. Id is rocky soil, and ze fever is nod gread."

"Which reminds me. We must take precautions," said Mr. Pepson. "I have brought ample supplies of quinine, and we must take a few grains every day. It is the only thing for an Englishman, or for any white man. But that is not the only precaution we must take against malaria. I have not lived in Sierra Leone all these years, nor travelled in many another fever-haunted country, without learning what to avoid. The cause of the fever is too doubtful for me to attempt to make a statement, but supposing it is the water, as the doctors say, then we must avoid unboiled or unfiltered water; and boiled water is certainly the safest. We must sleep off the ground, clear of the mists, and must choose the highest spot. If the stockade is well posted, all will be right. If not, we will rebuild it. Then there are the mosquitoes. Some, a few only, whose numbers are steadily growing, say that these insects convey the germ of malaria.* Very good. We will keep them away as far as possible by the use of curtains at night. Last of all, the man who exercises in the cool of the morning and evening, who avoids the direct rays of the sun at midday, and who eats and drinks lightly, stands a far better chance than

* This is now an accepted fact.

does the one who is lazy, and who is apt to indulge too much. Pass the biscuit, Dick, and light up if you care to do so, Meinheer."

According to their usual custom, a custom suggested by Dick, the launch kept her steam in till darkness had fallen, and then, as soon as the anchor had been hoisted, she ran farther up the river, and put over to the opposite shore. That done, she was anchored again, fires were banked, and the party settled for the night, the watch being taken in turn. On the following day, after half an hour's run, Meinheer Van Somering gave vent to a shout of delight.

"Mein friends!" he cried, as he danced on the deck till the steamer heeled. "Zose are ze drees. Look you. Two, and one lies on ze ozer. Ah, yes, Meinheeren, and ze riber is zere also. We are proud men do-day!"

"We are lucky, you mean," answered Mr. Pepson. "Who ever heard of an expedition setting off to find a tributary which runs into a river of this size some days' journey from its outlet, a tributary the mouth of which is hidden almost by jungle, and is marked only by two cotton trees. However, there it is, and now we are but a few miles from the landing-stage. Let's push on. It's hot and close here, and the sky is overcast."

They turned the nose of the launch for the narrow tributary, and steamed slowly into it, for there was no saying when they might encounter a sunken bough or some other obstacle. On either hand now were trees, the dense forest, while at the base of this forest grew a network of trailing plants. Every variety of

vine was there, and amongst them the one which produces rubber. Yams were seen in abundance, while orchids and other plants hung from the trees in festoons, their blooms illuminating many a dull patch. The banks were composed of slimy ooze and mud, and from these, as the boats trailed past, an occasional loathsome form was seen to waddle, and an alligator splashed into the water.

"Gentlemen to whom it is well to give the right of way," laughed the leader. "They will do us no harm, but I should be fearful if we were to be upset. Now, how far do we steam?"

"Five or six mile, Meinheer. You will know when we reach ze road, for zere is a liddle place to land. Oh yes, zere is no difficuldy."

"Then the sooner we reach the place the better," exclaimed Mr. Pepson. "I don't like the look of the weather. This is hardly the season for rains, but it looks as if we were in for a torrent."

An hour later a tiny staging was seen on the left bank of the stream, for the river was little more now. Indeed, in most places, the trees actually met overhead, while the dense foliage made the place so dark that dusk might have been falling. But in spite of the shelter obtained from the rays of the sun, the heat was intense. At the point where the staging appeared there was a break in the trees, and, as they drew opposite it, they saw that it had been erected at a point where another stream, a tiny tributary, emerged from the forest. Along its bank there was a path, while its mouth seemed to have been widened.

"All of which shows that we have a thoughtful

agent," said Mr. Pepson, as he put the helm over. "Back her, Johnnie. Steady. Ahead a little."

Very easily and gently the four craft were brought into the tributary, their painters being made fast to the trees which came close to the bank. Then the party landed and looked about them.

"Zis is hod, mein friends," grunted the Dutchman, as he stood panting in his shirt sleeves. "I do nod wish for zis walk in ze foresd."

"While I shall be glad to get it over," said Mr. Pepson, with emphasis, casting an eye overhead as he did so. "I tell you we are in for a storm, and that is hardly a pleasant prospect in such a place."

Dick wondered why, for the mass of the forest which hemmed them in on every side seemed ample to protect them from any harm which might come from a storm. But no doubt his leader had had experience and knew, and at his words he slung his rifle, took a bag of cartridges, and prepared to march. Johnnie, too, leapt to the shore, for there was no longer any need to leave a guard, and within a few minutes the party was *en route* for the gold-mine.

Almost for the first time in his experience, Dick marched by a forest road, a track cut through the heart of the jungle, and he began to realize what were the difficulties of transport in this remarkable country. For the path was barely wide enough to admit one single man, and the great girth of the Dutchman often brought him into difficulties. It bore signs of having been cut some weeks before, for the marks of knives and hatchets were often to be seen. But in spite of the care taken in clearing it, parts were already prac-

tically impassable; for vines and other creepers had grown across it. However, a few sweeps from Mr. Pepson's sword cut them clear, and the party were able to advance. They wound here and there, following the track, which deviated so as to avoid large trees and very thick brush. At times they sank to their knees in marsh land, while on several occasions they leaped or waded across streams quietly trickling through the jungle. It was all very new and very strange, and our hero could have enjoyed it more had it not been for the heat. It was intensely hot and muggy. Not a leaf stirred, and not a sound came to them save the creak of an occasional bough, and the crack of twigs which lay underfoot. Bird and beast life seemed to have departed. Mr. Pepson shook his head and hurried on.

"Better reach the open as soon as we can," he said. "This is no place for a man once the storm breaks. Listen! It is coming."

The tops of the trees moved while the tangle of leaves rustled. Dick thought he heard an indefinite sound, a distant hum, gradually rising in intensity, but as yet it was so slight that he was uncertain. He halted as Mr. Pepson turned round and mopped the perspiration from his face. Then, as he replaced his handkerchief, he looked at his chief and started back. For the leader of the expedition, usually so calm and self-possessed, looked as nearly terrified as Dick imagined it would be possible for him to be. He stared overhead, and stood there listening acutely.

"You hear it?" he asked anxiously. "You hear a moaning sound?"

"I fancy I did a minute or so ago, sir. Wait. Yes. There it is, without a doubt, and it is louder."

"Id is ze wind, mine frien, I zink," gasped Meinheer, seating himself on a fallen log.

"The wind! It is the storm. A tornado!" exclaimed Mr. Pepson, ominously. "I tell you we are in the greatest danger, and that we must act if we wish to be secure. Look about you, and find a spot where there are very big trees, and numbers of trunks which have fallen."

He went on all fours and peered into the jungle and up towards the summits of the trees, many of which towered for two hundred feet overhead. And presently, when they had moved on a few yards, Dick's hand went out and he drew his leader's attention to a part which seemed to meet his requirements. A glance seemed to satisfy Mr. Pepson, for in an instant his sword was out again, and he began to hack a road to the spot with all his strength. There was evidently no time for explanation, that Dick could plainly tell, for the distant hum had now risen to a roar, which seemed much nearer, while the tops of the trees above him rocked and strained in the wind. Then they were still again till another gust caught them. Whatever the danger to be feared, he had known Mr. Pepson long enough to be sure that it must be great, else why the haste, why so much anxiety? Whipping out his sword he fell to beside him, and together, with Meinheer following them, his coat over his shoulder, and his handkerchief mopping the perspiration from his face, they fought their way through the jungle till they had reached the spot which Dick had pointed out. And

here Mr. Pepson threw himself exhausted on the ground, gasping with his exertions, while Dick was glad to sit down. As for Johnnie, he crouched at the foot of a giant cotton tree and cowered there. Dick could see the whites of his eyes, and noticed that he trembled.

"Get in here," suddenly shouted Mr. Pepson. "The very place! It may shelter us."

He sprang to his feet, and forcing his way through some feet of the tangle, came to a tree of somewhat smaller dimensions as to height, but of enormous girth.

Like all the cotton trees in the forest at that point, the roots of this leviathan barely did more than penetrate the surface of the ground, for it was there that all the moisture lay. Below was a hard stratum which offered opposition, and as a result the roots had spread themselves out over a wide area, while they had risen into the air till there was an archway of large dimensions beneath the tree. Dick had seen the same before, and it had attracted his attention. At Mr. Pepson's shout he tore after him, and presently all four were stretched under the arch. Nor were they a minute too soon, for if there had been a roar before, the noise now was deafening and positively awe-inspiring. The gusts which had up to this caught the tops of the trees seemed now to be concentrated into one enormous blast. The very forest shivered and trembled. The tree-tops bent and the trunks groaned. Then the storm burst A sheet of lightning lit up the sky and even penetrated to the forest depths. The roar became even greater, till the volume of sound was positively deafen-

ing. And how the trees bent! The one beneath which the party lay trembled and swayed. As Dick's hand rested on one of the giant roots he could feel it moving under the strain, and wondered whether the huge mass would topple.

Crash! There was a sharp sound as if a cannon of small calibre had been fired, and a mighty tree a few yards away, fractured some feet from its base, came with a thud to the ground. Meinheer hid his face in his hands and groaned, while Johnnie rolled on the ground in terror.

"That was what I feared," shouted Mr. Pepson, now quite calm. "There will be many more before the storm is ended. But I fancy we are safe. They will not always fall so close to us."

Dick looked out into the jungle, his face calm and grave, though in his heart he felt terribly afraid. For this was something against which one could not battle. The storm would have its way whatever man might do, and to stand there utterly helpless, was trying. All round him he could hear the crash of trees. One fell even closer than the first, and caused him to step backward in alarm, for the mighty trunk was dropping directly towards him, sheering through everything that stood in its way. It lopped the tops from half a dozen cotton trees, and brought two more crashing through the forest with it. Then, as Dick thought that he and his companions must be destroyed, its branches became entangled in those of the tree which sheltered them. Again he felt the vast mass sway. The trunk actually gave out a loud report as if it had cracked. But it was a veteran, and, thanks to its huge girth, was of

unusual strength. It stood its ground, and when Dick looked again there was the falling tree held up in mid-air, with its two victims with it. It was a marvellous escape.

"That is the worst, I should say," said Mr. Pepson, coolly. "It was a narrow shave, I admit, but then I was expecting trouble. We are lucky, I can tell you, and you will realize the fact as we push on again. Ah! here comes the rain. I fancy we may congratulate ourselves."

They had indeed every cause to be thankful, for their escape had been a narrrow one. An hour later, when they emerged from the friendly shelter of the tree and struck out on the path once more, all realized this more fully. For hundreds of giants had fallen. Their trunks lay in every direction, many fantastically supported in mid-air, pillowed on the branches of their fellows.

"That is what one sees all along the coast," said Mr. Pepson, turning his head, "and I am told that some of the caravan routes which pass through this forest toward the interior are often almost completely blocked by fallen trees. It is the weedy youngsters that tumble. They run up swiftly, as straight as a rod, till they overtop the veterans. Then comes a gale, and owing to the nature of the ground and the little hold which their roots give them, they topple over. We've had a lesson, Dick. Keep out of forests in future when the wind blows."

A little later the party emerged into the open, and were delighted to find that there was a very wide clearing, the forest standing back on all sides for more than

a mile. And in this space the ground rose steeply, till its crest blotted out the view beyond.

"Rock," said Meinheer Van Somering, with a chuckle of delight. "Dad was ze report, I zink. We were told dad ze mine was well placed. I agree, Meinheer, for in zis coundry where zere is rock zere is gold."

At this moment a shout rang out in the silence, and a figure appeared on the crest of the rock.

"Our Dutch agent," said Mr. Pepson. "He is coming down to us, and soon we shall be at the stockade."

Indeed, within a quarter of an hour the agent had joined them, making his way down the steep rocky hill by a path which was invisible from where they stood.

"Mein word!" exclaimed the Dutchman, as he stared at his agent and watched his agility as he leaped down the steep path. "If zat is ze only way do ze stockade, we shall be dead. Yes, I tell you, we shall die, for who could climb such a blace? Id is too steeb."

"And happens to be the nearest way," replied Mr. Pepson, reassuringly. "Never fear, Meinheer, there will be an easier way down."

That the agent was glad to see some white men could not be doubted, for he rushed toward them with a shout, and commenced to greet Meinheer Van Somering volubly. Then he was introduced to the others, and shook hands with an eagerness which showed that for many a week he had had no one there with whom to practise the art.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," he cried, in excellent English. "That am I, for it is dull here. When you get to the top I shall show you why. You will see to

the right and left trees in one dense mass. To the north and south there is the same. Nothing but trees, and the blue sky overhead. It becomes tiring. But now you are here and I shall have company. Come this way. We can go by the path which I have just followed, or we can skirt round the hill."

They elected to go by the latter path, for the steep ascent would have been too much for Meinheer. After an hour's walk they found themselves on the far side of the rocky highland, and there before them lay the stockade, high up on the side of the hill, and within an easy rifle-shot of the forest.

"Trust a man who has been in these forests before to choose the right spot," said the agent, as he pointed it out. "This is the windward side, and the stockade even under a hot sun is delightfully cool. There is little fever here, and one can cope with it. Mr. Dick, you need have no fears for your health. The loneliness is the only thing which will trouble you."

"I have been thinking about that," answered Dick, "and I fancy I shall do something to distract my thoughts. Work in the mines or something of the sort. Perhaps help to improve the stockade and make it stronger."

The agent looked at him in surprise. "Stronger!" he exclaimed. "And why?"

"Because I fancy we might be attacked."

Our hero felt almost sure that there would be an attempt, for he had not forgotten James Langdon.

"Attack!" he said disdainfully. "The Ashantis will not harm us. They hate these Fanti men, and it is they against whom they war. They are out now with

the intention of fighting. Trust King Koffee to keep them away from us, for if we were harmed, what would happen to the payments made to him? As to this fellow, James Langdon, I fancy I have met him. You need not fear him, for he will never come so far. If he is in the service of the king of the Ashantis, he will be on the far bank of the river and miles from here. No, Mr. Stapleton, there will be no need to strengthen the post."

By now they had entered the stockade, and found it to be composed of roughly sawn logs, trimmed with the axe. Here and there a small interval was left for rifles, though it was obvious that the designer of the place expected no trouble. In the centre was a log hut, thatched with long strips of bark, which were pegged down to the timbers beneath. The windows were unglazed, but rough shutters cut from packing boxes were provided.

"Enter, gentlemen," said the agent, with some signs of pride. "You find yourselves in the salon, the smoking-room, and the bedroom of this house. It is only a rough shanty, sufficient to keep out the heat of the sun, and the rains, when they come."

"And a fine example of your work," exclaimed Mr. Pepson. "Now, what of the mines? They are close at hand?"

For answer the agent led the way out of the stockade and down the far side of the hill till the party came to the level ground. And here it was seen that a stream flowed, and lost itself a little way on in the forest.

"Everything is nicely within reach," said the agent. "You will find that the men work in couples, and as

there are twelve of them, there are six shafts open. We will go to them."

They ascended a small rise in front of them, and presently saw some natives working. They were hauling up wooden buckets from the mouths of narrow shafts driven into the ground, and were depositing their contents in a larger receptacle close at hand. At the river-bank Dick noticed a number of troughs of native workmanship, and began to gather the method adopted by the natives in their mining.

"It is all very primitive," said the agent, "and no doubt we do not abstract all the gold from the soil. A large part gets washed away. Still, considering our methods, we are doing well, and have already a good store of pure metal. Look into one of the shafts. Yes, continue to look till your eyes become accustomed to the darkness down there. That is the man who is working in the tunnel. You can just see his back. He will call out when his bucket is filled, and his friend up here will haul it up. It is slow, but sure, and in time there is a quantity at the top. If the man below comes to harder soil, his friend goes down to the river and washes. If not, he hauls, and at the end of the day the two wash the gold from the soil which they have gathered."

"But how on earth does the man get down?" asked Dick, for he could see that the hauling tackle was too weak for such a task.

"That again is simplicity itself," was the reply. "You see that the shaft is barely four feet across. The man carries a kind of narrow spade with which he digs the ground. Well, he places that across the top of the

shaft, and lowers his feet till they come to a niche on one wall. There it is. You can see it plainly. With his feet secure he leans back till his shoulders are against the far side of the shaft—in fact, till he is across the cutting in a slanting position. Then he releases the digger and lowers it, placing it in a similar position across the shaft. And so he descends, repeating the movement to the bottom."

"Primitive, certainly," agreed Mr. Pepson, "and I think it can be improved upon. We have brought hand-winding gear with us, and they will alter matters. The fellow below can lower himself, or get his friend to do so for him. Then the labour of raising the soil will be lightened. That reminds me. We have left our launch and the canoes at the landing-stage. What steps can we take to get our goods here?"

"We will become porters to-morrow," was the answer. "These Ashanti fellows are good tempered and willing if taken the right way, and you will find that they will undertake the task with pleasure. Leave it to me, sir."

That night the whole party lay down in the hut within the stockade. On the following day they returned to the river, and with the help of the natives had transferred all their belongings to the hut before darkness fell. But it was a more difficult matter to bring the winding gear through, and almost a week passed before it was in position. By then Dick was beginning to feel that he knew something of the work, and even found that he could make himself understood by the natives.

"I shall have no fears for you when we leave," said

Mr. Pepson, one evening as they smoked their pipes outside the hut. "You hit it off well with the natives, and you understand their methods of getting gold. You will store it, check the amounts they obtain, and pay them in gold dust if they require their money. If not, you will show them what they have earned, with the promise that payment will be made at any time. The store of metal you will keep here. Have no fears for it. I don't believe any one will dare to interfere with you. Now for our movements. I shall wait a little longer till this scalp wound is healed, and then Meinheer, our Dutch agent and I will return to the coast. We shall leave Johnnie and the launch with you, for you will need to send down for stores, and to deposit the gold, and we can return with as much ease by means of one of the boats. Our friend, the agent, tells us that the wind will be set down-stream, and that a sail will carry us to the sea almost as soon as would a propeller. From there to Elmina and Cape Coast Castle is nothing."

Accordingly, some three weeks later, the party set out, Dick passing with them through the forest to the landing-stage. One by one they shook hands with him and entered the native boat. Meinheer Van Somering swept his hat from his head and gave a deep flourish and bow. Mr. Pepson smiled his encouraging smile, while the agent busied himself with the sail.

"Push off!" sang out the leader, and at the shout Dick sent the boat out into the stream. Her head was pointed down towards the river Pra, her sail filled, and within a minute Dick was alone in the forest. His duties had commenced, he was now sole agent for the

gold-miners, the only white man in that part of the African forests. He turned on his heel, saw that the launch and the other boats were firmly secured to the bank, and went off with his head in the air, whistling cheerily.

CHAPTER VII

Forewarned is Forearmed

"I DON'T like the news, Johnnie," said our hero, one day, some weeks later, when he had quite settled down to his duties at the mine. "You say you saw some men encamped five miles and more away. Tell me all about them."

The native lad, an inhabitant of the coast near Sierra Leone, who had come from that part with Mr. Pepson, and who had been left to keep Dick company and to tend to the launch, put the short black pipe which he was smoking into the other corner of his mouth, and turned his eyes up till the whites alone showed, a trick of which he was very fond. He was, in fact, a comical-looking fellow. Short and square for a native, with woolly hair, and a few stray wisps of beard at his chin, he was dressed in a much patched pair of breeches, with ragged edges, the tags hanging about his naked toes. These same breeches were suspended from his shoulders by an ancient pair of braces, a gift from Dick himself, while a soiled and disreputable jacket, smeared with many a patch of grease, was over his back, serving for shirt as well as coat. He held a rifle in his

JOHNNIE BRINGS BAD NEWS

hand, and the state of his feet showed that he had just come in from the forest.

"Me go dere, as you say," he said, taking the pipe from his mouth. "Me look for something to eat, for massa want fresh meat. And then me see smoke. 'Dat strange,' say Johnnie. On de coast where me lib noting wrong in dat. Fires eberywhere. Smoke all de time. But here——"

Again his eyes turned up as if to show that this smoke was a matter for astonishment.

"Exactly so. Here one would feel surprised and alarmed. Go on."

"Den Johnnie tink, and say, 'Dese surely bad men, not like Johnnie,' so me start to run 'way. Den me creep back, and soon me see better. Dere ten, tirty, yes, fifty big native, all wid sword and gun, and dey sit round de fire cookin' and eatin'. Me look for dat scoundrel, dat white man who attack us below. But no, he not dere. Den me come 'way and tell massa."

It was serious news, and for a long while our hero was silent. For three weeks he had gone about his work at the mine till he was thoroughly acquainted with it. He had been down each one of the shafts, and had ingratiated himself with the men. It happened that in two of the shafts a rich deposit of nuggets had been come upon, not an uncommon find in the goldfields of Ashanti; and that, together with the increased comfort given by the winding gear, all of which was now in place, had so heartened the miners that he was more than popular amongst them. But he was still haunted with the fear of attack.

"There must be people who know that we are here,

practically with no means of defence," he had said over and over again to himself. "And no doubt the news of a rich find will in time be circulated. What is to prevent a ruffian like James Langdon making a raid upon us? I am here, in charge, and I must take steps."

That same evening he went to the miners when they had come up from the shafts, and told them the news.

"Our brothers are at war. There is nothing in this camp to alarm us or you," said their leader, when Dick had made himself understood, a somewhat difficult matter, considering his small knowledge of the language. "The Ashantis will not touch us. The Fantis would if they could, for we are weak, and should fall an easy prey to them. But these were Ashantis."

"And to-morrow a force of Fantis might come, too," added Dick. "Then what could we do?"

"We should be killed, the gold would be taken, and there would be an end of the matter."

"Then as I have no wish to be killed, I suggest that we take steps to protect ourselves," said Dick. "I have rifles at the stockade for all, and will arrange a signal. You say that you can all shoot. That makes matters better. We will practise to-night. There is a tom-tom at the stockade, left there by one of yourselves perhaps. I will beat that as the signal, and all will at once rush to the place, bringing their store of gold with them."

The miners looked at one another when they heard his words, and then commenced to discuss the matter together; for it was difficult for them to understand the need for such precautions. They had been at this mine

for some months now, and they had never been disturbed. At the same time rumour had reached them that their countrymen were at war with the Fantis, and that being the case, the latter would treat them as enemies. There was a big store of gold, the result of the last month's labour, and that would certainly go. They would be killed, too, and even if they were not, they would lose their wages, now owing for some months.

"We will do as you ask," said their chief, half an hour later. "There may be need for these precautions, and in that case we may have cause to be glad. On the other hand, the time wasted will be only short, and will not matter. What else shall we do?"

"Make for the stockade, as I have said, and when there we will arrange the method of defence," answered Dick. "Keep your ears open for the signal."

He left them, and an hour later, having seen Johnnie again in the meanwhile and instructed him to sound the alarm, he retreated to the stockade with the men, waiting till the last to see how they carried out the movement.

"That will do very well," he said, as they arrived, panting, in the stockade. "Now for other orders. The last man in throws the doors to and is helped by his friends. That is right. We are now safely behind stout walls, and can fetch our rifles. They are kept in this rack in the hut, and a bag of ammunition is hung to the muzzle of each. Let every one go in and help himself, and then run out to the walls."

He watched as the miners, a group of intelligent

men, carried out his orders. Then as they came hustling from the hut, pushing each other aside in their eagerness, he arrested them with a shout and with uplifted hand.

"Some one will be shot very soon," he said. "Some of you have already loaded, and guns go off sooner than they are wanted to under these circumstances. We must do things in an orderly manner, and each must have an allotted place. Tell your men off to a loophole apiece, chief," he shouted. "Now, that is better, and we will practise the move again."

Several times they carried out the exercise, Dick making them emerge from the stockade, and then, at a beat on the tom-tom, rush in, close the gates, and go in search of their rifles. No man was allowed to load till he was at his loophole, and then the order was that there should be no firing unless the enemy were clearly seen.

"We have a fair store of cartridges," said Dick, "but we may have to stand a siege. That being the case, we must not throw them away. Now let each man pick out a tree or some object, and aim at it. I'll give the order to fire."

By now the miners were beginning to take more than a passing interest in these manœuvres of their young chief. They had been talking the thing over, and had come to the conclusion that it would be worth while to safeguard their own interests. They had been away from their friends for a long time, and it might be that there was a war of considerable proportions raging, for the Ashantis were at daggers drawn with the Fantis, and took every opportunity of attacking them.

At Dick's call they poured a volley into space, and looked round for more orders.

"That will do very well for to-day. We will practise again every day, and I want to see that the men at the top of the shaft shout the alarm to their friends below and wait to haul them up. There must be no desertion of comrades."

Dick was as good as his word, too. The following morning, when he had carefully inspected the surroundings, and had seen that the miners were busily at work, he caused Johnnie to sound the alarm again, and stood in the neighbourhood of the shafts till all the men were up. Then the proceedings of the previous evening were repeated.

"That part of our precautions is arranged," he said to himself, as he smoked a meditative pipe. "Now I must look to another matter. Johnnie and I must take it in turns to go abroad into the forest."

It was a wise precaution, and from that day, turn and turn about, he or the native stoker, as soon as breakfast was ended, and while the day was still cool, would take a rifle and stalk away towards the forest. Sometimes they would go towards the river, to see that no one had tampered with the launch, and at others they would make in the opposite direction. But whichever road they followed, they were careful not to penetrate too deeply into the jungle, and to take their bearings before entering the bush.

"We might get lost," said Dick, "and besides, it is really laborious work cutting a path, however narrow. The main thing is to circle all around the mine, looking for traces of a possible enemy, and, of course, shooting

any game we may come upon, for fresh meat is a luxury."

One day, a week later, when our hero was out on his tramp, and had proceeded a couple of miles from the mine, he suddenly came to a halt, and stood there listening intently, for a sound had come to his ear.

"The tom-tom!" he exclaimed. "I feel sure, and from the direction of the stockade. Can the place be attacked?"

The thought threw him into a fever of apprehension, for supposing an enemy had appeared, and his men were within the stockade, what would happen to them without their leader? They were excellent fellows, but Dick had come to know that, without some one to direct them, they were useless.

"They would be all right for an hour or two if not pressed," he said. "But if they were rushed by a strong force—well, it would go hard with them. I must return. But can it be that that tom-tom was not from the mine?"

That was another momentous question, and, as he pondered over it, the perspiration poured from his forehead. He turned and retraced his steps at a run, breaking through the jungle in his feverish haste, tearing the vines and brambles aside and lacerating his hands and face with the thorns.

Hark! This time it was another sound that brought him to a standstill. There was the clear, crisp report of a rifle, a distant shout, and then a medley of sounds, the frantic cries of natives, and the sharp snap of answering firearms.

The place, then, was attacked. There could be no

doubt about the matter. And he, the leader, was outside the stockade. Dick clenched his hands and ground his teeth with disappointment. He had no fear for himself. He thought last of his own personal safety. A duty had been entrusted to him. He had been placed at the mine to defend it, and he was helpless to direct the men.

"They must hold their own, then," he gasped. "I cannot get to them yet, and they cannot know where I am. Very well, I will go where I can see what is happening, and then I must be guided by circumstances."

This time he did not rush through the jungle with such frantic haste. His impetuosity had given way to prudence, and, as he walked, he peered ahead, halting every now and again to make sure that he was not running upon the enemy. As he approached the clearing about the mine the snap of rifles became more audible. It was a spluttering fire now, an occasional shot, and then a succession of reports.

"That is what I like to hear," he said to himself. "It shows that they are not so closely pressed, and I think that they must be holding their own. If my men were being rushed there would be shouts, and rifles would be fired more frequently. Ah, it is getting lighter, and soon I shall be able to see."

He crept on all fours now, and presently came to the very edge of the jungle. But from where he was he could only see a fraction of the stockade, and not a soul was in sight. To obtain a full view he must creep round to the far side, where the attack was taking place.

"No doubt they have their camp there," he thought, "so I must be doubly careful. I'll slip into the trees again and go cautiously."

Well was it for him, too, that he took this precaution, for he had progressed only a little way when his keen eye caught sight of some natives out in the open. They carried rifles, and were making for the mines. Ditch watched them as they went to the shafts, and saw two of their number lowered into each. Then there was a shout, and they were hauled up again.

"Looking for possible stragglers," he thought. "It was a lucky idea to have a signal to recall the men. I suppose Johnnie must have sounded it. Ah, the ruffians are now looking for gold, but there again I fancy they will be disappointed. How I wish I had a dozen men here! I could pick the enemy off easily, and then a rush might drive the rest away."

By now the natives were retracing their steps, disappointed at their lack of fortune, and at once Dick crawled on again. An hour later he was round at the far side, and had a full view of all that was taking place. A glance showed him that matters were as he had hoped. The timely alarm, the previous training, and the careful instruction which had been given to the miners had resulted in their reaching the stockade in a mass, and in closing the doors on the attackers. Nor were there wanting signs that they had made their presence felt by the enemy, for ten dark figures lay sprawling in the open, some looking as though the men slept, while in other cases the bodies were doubled up in that fantastic position which is seen where men have been killed in the act of charging.

"Showing that our friends held their fire till they were sure of their aim," said Dick, with a chuckle, his spirits reviving immensely at the sight. "But the attack was a genuine one, for I can see one man close outside the stockade. Perhaps the alarm was only just given in time, and when the miners reached the stockade the enemy were in full chase and close behind them. Ah! They have been making long shots, too."

His hand went to his trigger suddenly, and he fell on his face in the undergrowth, for he had caught sight of a native some few paces away. He seemed to be leaning against a tree, and was partly in the open. A second glance, however, told that he was dead, for his head lay on his breast, and only the tree which supported him prevented his falling from his knees.

"Looks as though he had knelt to take a shot, and had been killed in the act," thought Dick. "He will be fired at again, perhaps. One of our men will see him, and not knowing that he has already ceased to be an enemy will fire. It would be safer for me to crawl on a little."

Once more he sneaked through the forest, his senses all alert, for now, at any moment, he might come full upon the enemy. Suddenly he heard voices, and at the sound crouched on his face. Then there came the rustle of vines and leaves, the soft tread of naked feet, and the dull blow of something harder striking the trunk of a tree. The voices grew louder, and, to Dick's consternation, they seemed to be coming directly towards him. He looked about him like a hunted animal, saw an immense cotton tree with wide-spreading roots, just such another as had sheltered the party

during the storm which they had encountered in the forest, and promptly crept into the narrow archway beneath. He was barely in time. Hardly had he squatted in the shadow, and found an aperture for his rifle, when a group of natives came into view, slashing the vines and creepers with their knives. And in their midst, his wide-awake hat and sallow features making him conspicuous, appeared James Langdon, his face convulsed, while his hands and teeth were clenched with rage. He could hardly speak, but turned every now and again towards the stockade and shook his fists, while he growled out an oath.

Once more Dick's rifle went to his shoulder, his cheek lay down on the stock, and he aligned the sights dead upon the half-caste's forehead. One pressure of the finger, the gentlest pull, and the man would be slain. The temptation was great, the call for such action clear, and yet, and yet——"

"Be a sportsman," whispered Dick to himself. "Shoot a fellow in cold blood, Dick Stapleton, even though he be a rogue and a robber? Never!"

He lowered the rifle, while the half-caste, all unconscious of his danger, snatched his hat from his head, and called a halt. It was clear that he was baffled. One could see it on his ugly, resentful face. There was a scowl in his every look, while his eyes, when he turned them towards the stockade, flashed in a manner which boded little good to the defenders, should they come into his power.

"They have us beaten, comrades," he suddenly exclaimed, while at the words the scowl became even more pronounced. "This white man is the cause of our

failure. He must have suspected, else how comes it that when we arrived they bolted to their lair? There was a shout as we came from the trees, and then the men at the heads of the shafts began to wind for their lives. In two minutes they were all racing for the stockade, and when we got there they were safe, while their bullets were flying amongst us. It is that cursed Englishman!"

The bitterness of his misfortune seemed to overwhelm him, for he threw himself on the grass, muttering and beating his hands together. Then he pulled a cigarette from his pocket, for this half-caste had accustomed himself to the manners of Europeans, and lit it with a match.

"To add to our trouble, there is no gold to be had," he almost shouted. "The dogs carried their day's takings to the stockade, where the remainder is stacked, I suppose. There are weeks of profit there, comrades; and we have heard that they have done well. Shall we retire now till our friends come to help us, or shall we make a second attempt? In a day we can have a hundred men to aid us, and then there will be no doubt of success."

"While the booty will be the smaller, for the reason that it must be divided," added one of the natives.

"Which is better than losing more lives," exclaimed James Langdon. "Besides, there will be plenty of booty for us all, for you know what is happening. We are on the way to Elmina. Your king is going to drive these white men out of the country, and that means plenty of loot for every man of us. But I will leave it to you. We will attack again now, for there

are fifty of us, or we will make a ring round them, and hold them tight till our friends come. We have them safely, in any case."

Dick listened with all his ears. At the mention of reinforcements his heart sank into his boots, while the news that war with Britain had broken out came as a shock to him. True, there had been grave rumours of trouble before he and the expedition had left the coast. But it was expected that the difficulty would be settled amicably. If there was war, he was cut off from his friends. In all probability the enemy were already between him and the coast, and, in any case, they would make for the river. It was a serious situation, and had he been in any other place, and not beset by foes, Dick would then and there have sat down and thought deeply, for, young and inexperienced though he was, his wits had been sharpened by the responsibility thrown upon him. He was naturally a shrewd young fellow; but till he came to Africa he had never been called upon to settle questions of great moment. He had hardly given a command in his life, save to the boys in his company in the cadet corps at school, and there, there had been no difficulty about the matter. Here, in the heart of the Ashanti forest, it was all so different. And yet Dick did not fall short of the estimate his employers had formed of him. Long before they had departed from the mine they had approved, time and again, their appointment of him as their agent.

"He is born for command," Mr. Pepson had said. "He is quiet, and inclined to be cool. He will not be hurried. I've watched him. Rather than give a hasty

decision he will slip away for a time, and then one sees him smoking his pipe and evidently cogitating. That's the sort of lad I can rely on. Ready, if there is need to act in haste, but given to reflection, weighing his words, and venturing no opinion unless he has considered beforehand. As to courage—well, that he has, we know."

Meinheer Van Somering had invariably replied that Dick was indeed brave, and who could realize the fact if he—a Dutchman—did not do so?

But under the present circumstances who could give thought to any question? Dick was crouching beneath the archway of roots within easy reach of a band of cutthroats who had made an attack upon his stockade. And in their midst was the ruffian who had systematically robbed his father, and who had wound up his crimes by robbing Dick, and then making a murderous attack upon the expedition. Would James Langdon spare him if he happened to discover his whereabouts? Would he cause the forest to be searched if he suspected that hidden within it was the youth whom he had wronged, and against whom he was so embittered? If Dick had had any doubts, the next few words of the miscreant relieved his mind of them, and set the perspiration again pouring from his forehead.

"Yes," said the half-caste, reflecting. "Our course is clear. We have failed to rush them, thanks to this white man and his precautions. I felt that he would be suspicious of a second attack, and would be ready for us. Then we will surround the stockade, for what hope have we of rushing the place? They are armed

with sniders, my comrades, and can fire three shots to our one. Then they are under perfect cover, while we are exposed in the open. No, no, it would be foolish to attack again. It would be wasting lives. We will sit down and wait for our friends, and when they come, ah! then there will be a different tale. These miners shall hand over their gold, and this white man —what shall we do with him? Think of your brothers who are slain!"

"We shall be able to deal with him," answered one of the natives. "We can send him back to Kumasi, and there he will be slain as a sacrifice. Yes, it will be good to appease our juju with the blood of a white man."

Dick had heard of the frightful rites perpetrated at Kumasi. He knew that these Ashantis were a warlike race, who were forever battling with their neighbours, and the tale had come to the coast, a tale the truth of which had been proved time and again, of a hideous bowl, of an executioner's heavy knife, and of the manner in which the captives were killed. He shuddered when he imagined that he was so near to such a fate. That within a little while he might be in the town of Kumasi, and while thousands looked on, hooting and shouting for joy, and James Langdon mocked at him, eagerly watching for a sign that his captive quailed, while the executioner made ready, might be dragged to that awful bowl, forced to his knees, and have his head struck off at a blow, while his life's blood was caught in the receptacle. Yes, he had heard the details. It was said that many thousand wretched captives uttered their last sigh in this vile town of Kumasi

every year, and that King Koffee and his warriors sought constantly to increase the number. No wonder that he shuddered, that he crouched still lower, while his hands became clammy with fear. The thought unmanned him. These natives, with their leader, looked like ogres waiting to take his life, and he, all alone there, was so helpless. But a sudden movement brought the manhood that was within him to the fore again. A native fidgeted. Then he strolled from the band, and noticing the tree, came and sat down with his back leaning against it. Dick could hear his breathing. His own heart, as it thudded against his ribs, sounded even louder, and to him, in the extremity of his danger, it seemed that discovery was an accomplished fact. He gripped the rifle till the cords in his wrists stood out clearly. Then he directed the muzzle at the man's neck, while his finger went to the trigger.

"Then we will arrange our stations," cried James Langdon, suddenly, rising to his feet. "We will surround them so thoroughly that there can be no escape. Come, all of you, to the edge of the clearing, so that we may discuss the situation."

The native rose to his feet at once, to Dick's huge relief, while the whole band crept to the edge of the forest, and looked across at the stockade. In their centre was the half-caste, eager and confident, in complete command of his men, and though they were now farther away our hero could distinctly hear and understand his directions. The circle was indeed to be complete. Men were told off to occupy the summit of the rocky crest, from which they could look down upon the stockade. It would be a full moon that night, so that

these natives could watch the surrounding country almost as completely as in the daytime. Others were ordered to occupy certain scraps of cover, with directions to fire at any one who showed above the stockade. And lastly, a second ring would encompass the inner one, for James Langdon would leave nothing to chance.

"We have a crafty fellow to deal with, and a big stake to win," he cried, as he glared across at the stockade. "There is gold there, my comrades, and there are men, too, to repay for the death of your brothers. True, they are of your own country, but they have defied you. They are not fighters. They live for wealth, and run when their country has need of them. Think, too, of the white man. He would be a prize indeed in Kumasi."

How much longer he would have continued to talk it would be unwise to guess, though there was little doubt that these natives under his leadership required no further encouragement. They were warriors of Ashanti, cruel-minded and blood-thirsty, and it was nothing to them whom they fought if they imagined they had a grievance. But there were others paying attention to that gathering. As the half-caste turned to see what effect his words had had, a single shot rang out crisply from the stockade, and a native standing beside him sprang into the air and fell dead on his face. There was a stampede at once, the gathering broke up and melted into the forest, leaving Dick alone, breathing more freely now that the danger was lessened.

"There is some one alert at the stockade," he said, with satisfaction. "Some one who can shoot, too.

Then I need not worry myself for the present. They will do well till I join them. But how is that to be done? Regain the stockade I must, but how, that is the question?"

It was a sufficiently knotty one, and not to be settled in a moment. Dick reflected that he could still make for the launch and steam down the river, for it was hardly likely that she had been discovered, so well were the creek and the tiny tributary hidden. But then——

"Can't," he said, with decision. "There are the men and the stockade to be thought of. Besides, I have to think of the gold. I must get to the stockade and join my men. Then we can decide what course to take."

He lay in his hiding-place for hours, till the twilight came, and then he crept to the clearing and looked out to see if he could discover the position of the natives who formed the inner circle about the stockade. He had heard a shot every now and again, and now as he stared from amidst the ferns and vines, he saw first one and then a dozen dusky prostrate figures, hiding behind boulders of large size, or masses of bush which happened to lie in the open, and which they had been able to reach by stealthily crawling across to them upon their bellies. At the back of the stockade, seeming in that half light to stand on the very top of it, were more figures, half concealed, keeping watch upon the place.

"Very good," said Dick, as he lay in the bush. "I know where they are at least, and must try to avoid them. Go I must, and if any man comes in my way, why——"

He rose to his knees and drew the short sword with

which Mr. Pepson had provided him. Satisfied that it would easily free itself from the scabbard, he inspected his revolver and popped that back into its case. Then his rifle went across his shoulder, and with a hitch he shortened the sling till there was no danger of the weapon swinging about. Half an hour later twilight had gone and darkness had settled down upon clearing and forest.

"This is my only chance," said Dick, as he rose to his feet. "There will be darkness for a few minutes, and then the moon will be up. I must make a bold dash for it."

He swung the rifle back on to his shoulders, drew his sword and revolver, and struck off across the clearing in the direction of the stockade.

CHAPTER VIII

Besiegers and Besieged

It was intensely dark in the clearing, as our hero struck into it, but by contrast with the shadows in the depths of the forest it was light, so that he could see a few feet before him. He could distinguish vaguely the outline of the rocky crest near the summit of which the stockade was posted, and beyond it and to one side the dull black band of the encircling forest. In one direction there was a faint glimmer in the sky, the herald of the rising moon, while a glare rose above the stockade, not intense, to be sure, but sufficient to tell him that a fire was burning there.

"Then they are not alarmed," he whispered, in tones of delight. "They are cooking their evening meal, which reminds me that I am hungry and thirsty, too. I must move on. Hullo!"

He fell like a stone, and lay with his body pressed close to the ground, for his ear caught a sound, and his eye detected a figure on his right. In that semi-darkness it looked huge and weird in shape, and might have been an ox or any other animal. But the low tones of men talking showed him that it must be the

enemy, and caused him to grip his sword with extra determination.

"Hoot! Hoot!" Once more he heard the call of the night owl, the same cry as had awakened him when ascending the Pra, and which had aroused his suspicion. It seemed certain that this was the signal commonly used by the Ashantis, just as it had been for many and many a year by the Red Indians of America. "Hoot! Hoot!"

The call was repeated, and almost at once, from a point but a few yards nearer to the stockade, came the answer, "Hoot! Hoot!" Then the men advanced, and halted close to their comrade, while a few words of direction passed. Dick could with pleasure have dropped through the earth, so great was his dismay and consternation. Then he could have shouted with delight.

"Just a bit of sheer good fortune," he thought. "Here was I advancing right on to one of the enemy, and these fellows gave me a warning. Very well. The hoot of the owl is the signal, and why should I not make it? Why should I not follow these beggars on their rounds? They will be visiting the sentries, and I shall then know where all are. I will go a little way with them, and then slip through between two of the men."

It was a brilliant idea, and he set about carrying it out at once. He lifted his head and kept watch on the natives, while he listened to their conversation. Not that he could hear the words, for these men were experienced warriors, and they knew that a whisper carried far on such a still night. They conversed in the

lowest of tones, and then moved on. "Hoot! Hoot!" The weird call again broke the silence, and was responded to. Then the native chiefs who were going the rounds moved on, and after them crept Dick, as silent and stealthy as a snake, one hand placed before the other, groping the ground to see that it was clear of twigs or other material which might betray his presence. Then the other would follow, and afterwards his knees would be drawn up beneath him, and he would repeat the whole process. "Hoot! Hoot!" There it was again. A third sentry had been approached, but Dick could not see him even though he was so close.

"Which shows me clearly how difficult the task is," he thought. "But for those fellows going the rounds I should have walked right on to this batch of sentries, and then there would have been a row. Hullo! Some one else is on the alert."

He could have laughed, for as the natives went on their way and repeated their signal, the Ashanti miners in the stockade must have carefully listened. Then they thought they espied the enemy, standing against a piece of open ground which happened to be exceptionally light in colour. Suddenly a single shot rang out, the detonation startling every one, and making our hero jump. For a single instant the stockade became outlined, and Dick thought he saw heads peeping up above the baulks of timber. Then all was darkness again and silence, save for the hoot of the native chief and the answer of the sentry.

"Time to be moving on," thought Dick. "I have barely half an hour in which to reach friends, and now

is my opportunity. These fellows here will have their attention distracted by the call of their comrades going the rounds. I may manage to get through. In any case I shall chance it, and if I am discovered I shall make a dash for the stockade. I suppose I shall have to run the chance of being shot, for how can my own men know that I am not one of the enemy? That also I must risk. Anything better than to be out here alone."

Inch by inch he made his way across the open in the direction of the hill, his eyes turning from side to side, while he halted every minute. He was quite cool now. The imminence of his danger, the knowledge that there were enemies very near and on either hand, seemed to have braced his nerves. His heart had ceased to thump like a sledge-hammer against his ribs, while he could no longer feel his pulses beating and throbbing till it was almost painful. He had need of every faculty, of coolness and courage, and he did not mean to throw away a chance. Hush! A man, the sentry on his right, sat up suddenly, and as Dick crouched he could see that the fellow was listening. He had heard something which had aroused his suspicions, and with all the keenness of a native for the chase he would probe the matter to the bottom, he would not be satisfied to rest till he had cleared up the mystery. "Hoot! Hoot!" He sounded the signal, and for an instant our hero's heart failed him. Should he answer? Was he seen?

"Yes, I believe he has heard me," he thought. "He wonders who I am. I will answer. Hoot! Hoot!"

In very low tones he gave the call, and waited

eagerly for what was next to happen. Then he gave vent to a sigh of relief. The man was deceived. He took this other figure for a comrade, and imagining that he was too close, and that the circle would be too open on the farther side, he rose to his knees and crawled to the right, till he was out of sight and hearing. After that Dick waited no longer. He crept forward, stealthily and slowly at first, till he was yards nearer the stockade. Then he increased the pace till he judged that he was clear of the inner line of sentries, and almost within hailing distance of his friends. But still he would not neglect the precautions he had decided were necessary.

"I feel inclined to jump to my feet and make a bolt for it," he thought. "But no, that wouldn't do, and I might easily be shot from the stockade. Slow and sure, said the tortoise, and I'll stick to the motto."

None but those who have been placed in a similar position can fully appreciate the temptation to which he was put, the huge desire which took hold of him to rise to his feet and run. Dick felt as the man does who is in full view of the rifles of unscrupulous marauders, without cover for many yards, uncertain whether to expect a hail of bullets or not. A sense of dignity, the feeling that it would not be courageous to run, holds one steady; but the temptation is there. There is a queer little feeling in the small of the back, and if one does not run, and conquers the temptation to act as a craven, one longs to look round, to make sure that no violence is about to be attempted. That was how our hero felt, and who will blame him? He was so near a refuge and friends now, and seemed clear of the

enemy. It would be so easy to run. However, he stuck to his motto, and, still remaining on his knees, slowly crept closer to the stockade.

Hist! Something caught his ear, and he sat down to listen for some minutes till he felt sure that he was mistaken. Then he crawled on again, till of a sudden he swung round, and, with a cry of dismay, leaped to his feet. There was a man following him, a figure bent almost double, silently coming up with him. Had he but known, it was the identical sentry whose signal he had answered and who, still suspicious, had returned on his tracks. He was within three yards when Dick saw him, and the cry had hardly left his lips when the man was upon him.

With all the ferocity of a tiger he leaped at his enemy, native sword in hand, and as the fingers on his left hand closed on Dick's shoulder, the murderous weapon swooped upwards in a stroke meant to transfix his body. But again the white man had good fortune. His guardian angel seemed to be on the watch that night, for the point caught the sling of his rifle, and turning aside the whole blade flashed beneath his arm till the hand which held it came with a thud against his side.

"Dog!" shouted the man, thinking he had accomplished his purpose.

Dick made no answer. He knew that if he did not hold that arm which gripped the sword he was as good as dead, and quick as lightning he took the only step to retain it. As the blade flew beneath his arm, and the man's hand crashed against his side, he brought his own arm down, jamming the native's hand there.

"THE BLADE FLASHED BENEATH HIS ARM"

Then he shook his hand from his shoulder, and lifting his own blade, plunged it with all his force into his enemy's breast.

Hardly had the man fallen at his feet, when a series of shouts rang out, rifles blazed from the stockade, and ere he could move half a dozen natives were upon him. For Dick had made one miscalculation. He had forgotten that he was dealing with men who were from their youth trained as warriors, men accustomed to the trail, to forest warfare, and to every form of artifice. He had not recollected that these Ashanti fighters had the acutest hearing and phenomenal sight, and he, a mere white man, accustomed to city life, had imagined that he could creep through them. Bitterly was he mistaken, for one had first suspected the presence of an enemy and had then followed, while a comrade, discovering the fact in some subtle manner, had come on his tracks, five others following. Gradually they had gained on the chase, so that when Dick struck their leader down the rest were almost on him. Again there was a shout, taken up by a score of voices around the clearing, and in a second a fierce hand-to-hand contest had commenced.

"The white man! The white man! Take him alive! Do not kill him!"

It was James Langdon's voice, coming from close at hand, for the news that some one was astir had been sent to him and he had followed.

"I give you all warning. Do not slay him, if you value my friendship."

It was a fortunate thing for our hero, but not so for the natives. Flinging their arms aside they sprang

forward to bear him to the ground. But if they had orders not to harm him, he had no scruples in killing them. The fear of captivity and of its consequences was before him. He struck out blindly with his sword, and when that was jerked from his hand he opened fire with his revolver, his shots punctuating the shouts of his opponents. But it was a one-sided engagement, and the darkness was against his chances. Already he had almost been borne to the ground by a huge native, who had leaped on his shoulders. But a sudden turn, the shortening of his pistol arm, and a quick and effective shot, had relieved him of the burden. Then two of the enemy had snatched at his legs, while a third aimed for his back, and missed it by the merest chance. He was about to spring again, while others were there now prepared to take his place should he not succeed. Dick was helpless. He had fired his last cartridge, and though he used the butt of the revolver and his fist, he was already outmatched. The end came quickly. The native behind him caught his rifle in both hands, and then put out all his strength. Dick lost his balance, and dragged by the sling was soon in a heap on the ground.

"Captured! We have him! Tie his legs and carry him off before the other dogs can come!"

There was such a hubbub that the words were hardly heard; but the Ashantis knew what was required of them. They slipped a noose over his hands and shoulders, and were drawing it tight when there was a rush of feet in their direction.

"Dere! Dey here. Come long! Fire!"

Dick could not believe his ears. He was already be-

ing dragged away, when Johnnie's voice broke upon his ear. Then a number of dark figures burst in upon his captors, and a fierce conflict began.

"Here I am. This way!" he shouted, as he struggled with the enemy. "Here! Over here!"

The gallant fellows from the stockade raced after him, Johnnie being at their head. In his hands he held a rifle, and without doubt it was his frantic wielding of this weapon which saved the situation. With a crash the stock fell upon the head of the native who had hold of our hero, causing him to fall. Another movement and the same fate overtook another. There was a scream of alarm, a few heavy blows struck by the knives of the men, and Dick was free, unharmed, and in their midst, boiling over with gladness and exultation. They picked him up as if he had been a child, and bore him in triumph to the stockade.

"Bang de door," said Johnnie, taking upon himself the command of the station. "Now, yo men, jest put de massa down—so. Not throw him down, silly!"

Utterly oblivious of the fact that the Ashanti gold-miners could not understand, he gave his commands in a tone of comical haughtiness which at another time would have caused Dick to roar with laughter. This was, indeed, a new side to Johnnie's character. But our hero was to learn more.

"Now man de walls, and shoot dem debils down," shouted Johnnie, taking his rifle and running to an aperture. "Dat so. You quite understand. Den me see to massa."

He was delighted to have him back, safe and sound, and stood there wringing his hand till it seemed that

he could never stop. However, Dick was a practical fellow, and it was a long time since he had been in the stockade.

"Food and something to drink, Johnnie, like a good fellow," he cried. "Run along and see what you've got, while I take a look outside. Now," he said, when he had reached the walls and had discovered the position of the chief of the miners, "what is your report? Any sign of them?"

"They have gone back to their posts. We knew that they were watching, and we almost expected an attack. We were looking for you too, chief. You can leave us to guard the place till you are ready to come back to the walls. Go and eat, for you must be hungry."

Dick undoubtedly was, and fell to eagerly upon the good things which were placed on the folding wooden table in the hut. For Johnnie was general caterer as well as stoker, and in addition, it seemed, commander of the post at a pinch. He placed a bottle of water near at hand, some yams, and a cut of tinned beef, and on these our hero fell.

"Yo's make de most of dem water," said Johnnie, as he watched his master drink, for it had been a hot day, and never a drop of fluid had Dick been able to touch. "Make de most of him, for dere little more. De jars nearly dry, and where we fill dem again? So drink him to the velly bottom."

"What! No water in the place! Run out already!"

No wonder that he was again dismayed, for Dick had such a young head upon his shoulders that he could not be expected in a matter of a couple of months

or more to correct all the faults committed by his predecessor. True, the site of the stockade was excellent in nearly every respect, for it commanded a wide, open space on every side, and could not be fired into from the crest above. It boasted a moderate amount of shade, for there was a small group of trees within the compound, and in addition, it enjoyed a delightful breeze, which kept it cool, and drove the fever away. It had its failings, however. It could not stand a siege, for the simple reason that it was perched well up above the stream in which the gold was washed, and there was no well. A store of water was carried up every day, and that store had disappeared with rapidity since the miners had taken post at the stockade.

"I ought to have thought of that before. We should have had a tank or something of the sort," cried Dick, with vexation, quite forgetful of the fact that the nearest point at which such a thing could be obtained was Elmina.

"Yo's dink him up and smack de lip," said Johnnie. "No use make fuss now dat dere no water left. Hab to leave den, dat's all. Get way into de forest."

"And meet these two hundred Ashanti warriors. No, thank you, Johnnie. Come, tell me how all this has happened. I was away in the forest, and thought I heard the alarm sounded. Then there were shots, and when I came to the clearing and could see, there were bodies lying around, and you were holding the enemy in check. I heard then that two hundred more are expected, and waited till a double ring was thrown round us. Then I came on. And that reminds me,

It was a plucky rush you made, and just saved me. Thanks, very much."

"Noding, massa. We wait and we expect yo come. We guess you not seen by de rascal enemy, and we know yo not rush here when it light. De moon coming up. See um. Den we guess you come jest after it get dark. We get ready, and den rush. Simple as eatin'."

"And about the alarm?"

"Not so simple," was the candid answer. "Johnnie seem to tink dere trouble coming. Eber since he meet de Ashanti war men he say, 'Dere ruction ahead, dere goin' ter be smash up of de mine. Johnnie look out from de hill when massa gone, every single day, and sit dere waitin' wid de tom-tom. Lucky, too, massa, for we not hab velly much time. Me see black chap come out of de tree, and den dat half-white man who fight us before. Johnnie beat de tom-tom till all de miners hear. Den he run to the stockade and pick up de rifle. He see first one and den all de men racing in, and after dem de enemy. Dey rush right up to de gate. But Johnnie stop um."

The comical little fellow turned his eyes up to the moon and squinted at Dick. He threw his chest out, stood to his fullest height, and put on an air of dignity.

"How?" asked Dick.

"Like dis. De men run in de gate, and de last man bang um to and bolt um. Den we stand at the peephole and wait. Two of de rascal come runnin', and Johnnie take good aim. Bang! When me look 'gain both lying on de face, dead's muttin'."

"And you took command of the stockade?"

"Y's guessed right, massa. Me hold de reins. Me shout de orders, and de men brave and behabe demselbes. We fire slow and careful, same as massa tell us, and we still plenty cartridge left."

"And practically no water. That is the most serious news, and makes it impossible to remain for long where we are. How long will the moon be up, Johnnie?"

"Soon down," was the answer. "In four hour, I tink."

"Then we will consult with the chief. Fetch him along, Johnnie."

Dick strolled out into the compound, and having made sure that all was quiet and that the men were alert, he took his seat close to the gate, with Johnnie and the two chief miners beside him. It was a strange place and a stranger hour to have a meeting, and as remarkable, too, was the fact that Dick could only just make himself understood and gather the meaning of the natives, while Johnnie was useless at the task. Still, Dick was able to act as interpreter, for he could speak a little Fanti, and there is only slight difference between that and the Ashanti dialect. Tersely the young leader of the party told his news, how he had overheard the half-caste, and how two hundred Ashanti warriors were expected.

"They will eat us up," said the chief, with an involuntary shudder when he heard what Dick had to say. "They will pour like a river up to the gates of the stockade, and we shall not stop them. They will swarm over, and we shall be slain."

"While if we are successful during the day they

would certainly succeed at night, chief. Then there is the question of the water."

The chief shook his head dolefully.

"We are as good as dead," he said, "and glad I am that one can meet with death only once. As well sally out now and end the matter."

"And be shot down like birds," was Dick's answer. "But I agree that the situation is serious. We should be better off were we out in the forest, for there we could divide and scatter. Again, we could make for the launch and steam down the river."

"If it were possible," cried the chief, with a look of hope in his face. "But how to get away? These foxes close round us. They know that we are secure, for who could leave the stockade now?"

"I got in safely, thanks to your rush. Why can we not get out again? Can you think of nothing? Come, man, we must make an effort."

"But it was useless. The chief of the miners could make no suggestion. He and his men were ready to follow their leader to the death, and he could rely upon their courage. But they could offer no plan of escape. They came of a race noted for its ferocity and courage, a race trained to arms, but they were more inclined to the ways of peace.

"Then I will tell you what I think," said Dick, when many minutes had passed, and the four had stared silently at one another as they sat in the rays of the moon. "We agree that death waits for us here, whether by the knives of the enemy or by water famine. Then we must go. The question becomes when and how? I will tell you. We must distract the attention

of these men, and this is how I propose that we shall do it. First of all, however, are there any here who can creep like a snake through the grass and so escape discovery?"

The chief threw his head up proudly. "That is one of the first lessons we learned as boys," he said. "There is not a man here who cannot do that."

"Then this is my plan. As we sit here, the launch lies straight over the crest of the hill where some of the enemy crouch. I believe that so far our boats are undiscovered, and that being so, the enemy will not expect us to take that direction, seeing that it is the roughest and the steepest. It would be natural for us to strike to right or left of the stockade, for the attack has been in the very centre."

There was a grunt of acquiescence as Dick paused to look at the chiefs.

"Our chief speaks wisely for one so young," said the leader. "But we know him now, and can expect good advice. Say on."

"We decide, then, to flee by way of the crest. Then we must make a demonstration in the opposite direction. We will choose that to our right, being the farthest from the crest. We will send out four of our best and most active men just after the moon disappears, with orders to get as close as possible to the enemy and then fire on them. These men will retire within five minutes, when they will be joined by more who also will fire. We will move swiftly from right to left and back again, and the men can be so disposed that there will be no danger of hurting one another. That should alarm the enemy, and, in

any case, it will attract the attention of those in that quarter."

"They will take alarm and think that we are attempting to break through. They will call in all the men," said the chief, with assurance. "I begin to follow your meaning."

"While the firing is going on two of our number who are accounted brave"—Dick noticed that the chief again tossed his head into the air—"will creep to the top of the hill and over it. They will be given a quarter of an hour to see that it is clear. They will not be satisfied till they have killed the sentries or shown that they are absent. Then one will return with the news."

"And the whole party will follow him," burst in the chief, eagerly.

"Hardly that," said Dick. "They are still out in the open, and they must retire. Even then the ruse might be discovered if the firing were not continued. The enemy would suspect a ruse and would send out to intercept us."

"Then what is your plan, chief?" asked the native, his curiosity aroused to the fullest. "The men retire and keep up the firing, you have a man on the crest and the report that all is clear. Surely there will be no need for delay. Haste, rather, is what is called for."

"Quite so," agreed Dick, quietly. "The men retire, and as they pass into the stockade they each take up a bundle of gold dust, for it would never do to leave our profits to these robbers. Then, led by the man who has descended the ridge, the miners will creep over the crest and descend the hill. They will make for the track in the forest, and will gain the boats as soon as

possible. Arrived there, they will get the fire going aboard the launch, hook on one of the boats, or two if they are necessary, and wait for their comrades. I said that one of the latter would be the scout who lay on the crest."

"That man will be myself," said the chief, calmly. "A leader should always take the post of danger and protect his men. We are not warriors, but we know how to act."

"You have proved it already. You will be one of those two. I shall be the other. No. Do not let us argue. Your own words prove that I have taken the proper course. As leader, I remain till all are gone, and I shall keep up a fire with my rifle till all are clear. Then I will take steps to prevent these robbers from carrying off even a stick of firewood, and will rejoin you on the hill. Afterwards we will fight our way to the boats."

He could see their eyes gleaming there in the moonlight as only the eyes of a dark-skinned man can gleam. The plan pleased them, that was clear, for when Dick had explained it to them to the best of his ability, all in turn gave expression to their approval with grunts, the meaning of which was undoubted. All seemed to think that they were in a very dangerous position, and that if this plan would not help them then nothing would.

"Better to die sword in hand than at the stroke of a vile executioner," said the chief. "We could sally out and surrender. But would that help us? We should be well received and well fed. The march to Kumasi would be by easy stages, and then the trouble would

commence. Better to die as brave men, than to be slain as cravens, with our arms bound to our backs."

There was undoubted truth in the statement, and the knowledge of it heartened them all. They would behave as brave men, and would meet this danger with daring. If they prospered, well and good; if not, then they would not live long to mourn the misfortune.

"And at any rate, I shall have made sure that that robber, James Langdon, does not reap any advantage," said Dick. "The men will take every ounce of gold, and if hard pressed will open the sacks and scatter the dust. As for the place itself, the half-caste shall not find a home ready built for him should he elect to take up the work of gold-mining. He shall find the land as it was, clear of all houses."

There was a look of determination on his face. He rose, gripped each of the chiefs by the hand, and went forward to speak to the men, for time was pressing. In an hour the moon would wane, and in two it would be time to set out. Better make the attempt at the earliest moment, and so have ample time for escape.

CHAPTER IX

Deceiving the Enemy

"You have been the round of the men and have told them our plan?" asked Dick, some minutes later, as the chiefs came to his side again. "Is there one who does not understand?"

"Not one, white chief. Two are to go to the crest behind when you shall say that the time for that movement has come. Those two will be myself and my brother here. If there are men up there they shall die. Those who pass to the front of the stockade know their orders well. Each will attempt to find an enemy, and will fire. He will fire into the forest if he can see none, and will retire slowly, firing occasionally all the while. His duty also is to run from side to side, so that it may trouble the enemy to know where we are coming. But gradually the miners are to collect closer to the right, and we hope the enemy will gather there, too. If all is well with us by then, you will know, for one will return. Then you will pass on to the men in front. They will retire, and we shall make for the forest—that is, all but myself."

Dick expressed his satisfaction, and was about to turn away when Johnnie came forward to speak to him.

"What Johnnie do?" he asked.

"You will lead the men to the road through the forest," said Dick. "Once you reach the launch, get your fire going and steam up. Then lay off, with a boat attached, if you think the launch will not carry all of us. See that the gold is packed on board, and, above all, destroy the other boats. Beat them to pieces and sink them in the stream, where they will not block your path. Wait and be ready for those who follow. The chief and myself may have to run for it."

"And why me not stay to help massa?" demanded the little black fellow, earnestly. "We know de path in de forest. Me quick, and can help. Why me not stay?"

"Because in this matter of our escape every man must carry out the task for which he is best fitted. We rely on you, Johnnie, to get steam up. If you fail, what will happen to us all?"

"Um! Me see well 'nough now," was the answer. "Me go right 'nough. But me rather stay, massa. Me always want to help."

Dick patted him on the back, for he had long ago seen that Johnnie was a faithful fellow, and had taken his master into his special favour. He did not trouble to seek the cause, but knew that it was a fact—the little man had been proving his devotion to him in a hundred ways since they two had been left alone at the gold-mine. But had Johnnie been asked, he would have quickly supplied a reason.

"Me lob Massa Dick," he would often murmur to himself. "He not like some of dese white men who comes to de coast. Dey velly young often—jest like

him—and dey tink dat dey oh so much finer dan de poor black man. So dey am; but no need kick and swear at um. Massa not like dat. He say, 'Please, Johnnie,' nice and friendly, when he want him food. And he never forget 'Tank you, Johnnie.' Dat what me like. Me work for man like dat. And massa velly fine young fellow. He brave. He make friend eberywhere—same's Massa Pepson and de fat Dutchman. Dey his broders, who lob him same's Johnnie."

It was a clear explanation, and no doubt was perfectly truthful. Indeed, there is little doubt that a little more thought on the part of the white man would often result in better relations between himself and the man of darker complexion. Youth and inexperience are no excuse for harsh dealing and bitter words, for sneers and open scoffing. The black man needs special treatment. He can be ruled easily and well. He can be made a faithful and contented servant, and there are none more fitted to be his masters than are Englishmen. But whatever the black may be, he is a fellow human being, and deserves common kindness and courtesy, till he has proved himself unworthy of either; and a little care in such matters—more care than is always given—would perhaps lead to better relations in our Indian dominions.

"Me go wid de first lot, den," said Johnnie. "Time massa reach de launch she hab steam fit to bust."

"Then off you go to the hut, and bring me along that drum of kerosene oil we use for the miners' lamps. Wait, though. I'll go with you."

He trudged off to the hut, and there for a quarter of an hour he and the little black stoker were hard at

work, feeling sure that the miners would meanwhile hold all secure. Indeed, there was little to fear, for the moon was still up, though it was now close to the summit of the tree-tops, and would soon fall below the forest and be hidden. Still, while it was light, movement on their part, or on that of the enemy, would be madness.

"Now, Johnnie, smartly does it, as the sailors say," cried Dick, as they entered the hut. "We will have that small lantern alight, and then we will commence operations. I am going to lay a little supper for Master James Langdon, expert thief and murderer. I will leave him a little legacy which will hardly please him. Got the lantern? Then bring all the picks and spare mining tools. Bring everything, in fact, likely to be of use in the mines, and now held in our stores. Pile them in the centre of the floor here close to the drum."

The native looked up in astonishment, but flew at once to carry out the order. It took very little time, indeed, for the stores held in the hut were not very large or diverse. There were just sufficient spare parts to replace a few breakages—enough, in fact, to keep the mine going in its then primitive condition, and till it had shown whether it was valuable or not. The various articles were dumped down in the centre of the hut, while Dick busied himself with throwing there all the odds and ends of clothing hanging to the walls, scraps of paper, and inflammable articles.

"Now for the gold," he said. "We have it in bags already, and have merely to divide it. Let me see. There are twelve miners, and they, with our two selves, make fourteen. Subtract two, for the chief and my-

self, who remain behind, and that leaves twelve. Twelve bags, Johnnie, do you hear?"

The native grinned. He began to see a joke in all this hurry and bustle. He darted towards the store of gold, which was kept in small canvas bags, and helped Dick to divide it up. There was not a large quantity, though the mine had done remarkably well. Still, so rich is the ore in Ashanti that, thanks to the work of the miners and Dick's care, the store was of great value.

"Me laugh, ha! ha! ha! You see de face ob dat half-white scum," cried Johnnie. "He lob de gold. He say now to himself, 'Me soon wring de neck ob all dem fellers, and special of de white man whom me hate like pisin. Yes, me turn dem out, and den me set oder boys to work. Yes, fine game me play. Get shaft dug, ground open, all de labour done. Den walk in, find house, plenty gold, stockade, gun, eberyting.' Golly! he make bit mistake dis time. He find nest clear, p'raps. All de eggs cooked, de old birds flown 'way, and all velly hot. No gold, no food, noding. Him cuss and swear. Him rabe. Him say, 'Hang dat Dick Stapleton. Me kill um by little inches when me hab de feller.' How Johnnie like to stay and see him go crazy."

"Thank you, I'd rather be far away," said Dick, with a laugh. "Mister James Langdon is a gentleman who would kill me with less compunction than he would tread on a beetle. No, thanks. No staying for me."

"No Johnnie, neider, tank you all same, massa. Me get to de steamer, and yo see. When yo come, she

fairly jumpin', so ready to go. Yes, me break up de oder boats and hab all ready. Make no trouble. Johnnie know what to do."

"Then let's place these bags in a row just inside the door of the stockade," said Dick. "We'll put the lamp there, too, so that the light cannot be seen outside, but so that the men can distinguish the bags. Then, as they retire, they will pick one up and go up the hill. That's all clear. Come along."

Ten minutes later they had laid the wealth of the gold-mine at the door of the stockade, and each man had been brought to the position and been given full instructions.

"You can trust the matter to them entirely, white chief," said the leader of the miners. "You must have seen that they are honest, and besides, all have an interest, and if one happened to be a robber, the others would soon arrest him."

"Then I will complete my arrangements. I see that the moon is almost down. Has there been any movement amongst the enemy?"

"They have crept a little closer," was the answer. "We did not fire, as it did not seem necessary. They have drawn in their circle out here in front, and I believe that they have brought one or two men from the crest."

It was comforting news, for if the enemy's position were known, the task of the defenders would be easier.

"They know that our case is desperate," thought Dick, "and they have come in closer to keep us in. They will not make a rush themselves after what I heard them say. Then at the very first our men should

be able to locate them and drive them back. Good! Now for the last preparation."

He went off to a corner of the stockade, and came staggering back with a small barrel over his shoulder, while Johnnie followed with a square case.

"Place it there carefully," said Dick, as they arrived close to the gate. "Now break it open, and unpack the contents."

The materials in the box were rapidly exposed to view, and one by one they handled rockets of enormous size, detonators, and fuses, for an assortment of explosives had been brought to the mines. Dick took the end of a pick and pried the lid off the cask. Then he tore off his hat.

"Hold," he said to Johnnie. "That's right, and keep well away from the lamp. It's gunpowder, and would send us up to the sky. That's the way, Johnnie; now put the barrel down and hold the hat."

He had filled his hat with the shining black grains, and now he arranged the barrel a few feet within the stockade, covered it with an old cloth which he had saturated with kerosene, and then placed the rockets and other explosives on top. Meanwhile the lamp was kept at a respectful distance. By now the moon had fallen below the tree-tops, and already the light had faded to such an extent that it was difficult to see more than a few feet. It was time to begin moving, and again a call brought all the garrison to the gate.

"This is the bomb which I hope will help us," said Dick, a grim smile on his lips. "Look at it there, gunpowder and bombs. Very well, then; I have showed it so that you will not stumble on to it. Let each one

now lie down at the gate. When I give you the order you will all file out, and on your return you will find the gold bags where they are now, and the lantern beside them. Each will take a bag and retire to the back of the stockade. There one of your chiefs will be waiting for you, and he will give you the direction. You will make for the forest and the boats. A last warning. Do not get too close to the enemy. You know their position, and can creep sufficiently near to make your shots tell. Shout to one another, and make it appear as though a rush were about to be made. In a quarter of an hour you can begin to retire. Come back, firing slowly. When you meet me I will send the word to each. Then slink off at once. Now, Johnnie, the drum of kerosene."

He took the cap full of gunpowder, and began to lay a train, spilling the black grains in a thick line across the grass towards the hut. He ran it in through the door, taking care to keep the train well to one side where his feet would not touch it. Then he emptied what remained in a pile in the very centre. And meanwhile Johnnie carried the lamp, giving just sufficient light to show the way, and holding it as far from his barrel of kerosene as possible. And now there remained but two things to do. There were a few drops of water left in the bottle, drops to which the black had drawn Dick's attention without avail. He took them now and threw them on his little heap of powder, stirring the mass with his fingers, and kneading it till he had the substance soft and sticky. Then he arranged it in the shape of a pyramid, and, having made his "devil," carried it into the far corner of the room.

He still had a few grains of powder left, and these he ran as a train from the devil to the clothing and odd stores which lumbered the floor.

"Finished," he said at length, surveying his work with much pleasure. "Now the oil."

Taking the drum, he pulled the cork out of the bung-hole and let the contents pour over the heap in the centre of the hut. He threw some over the walls, saturating every corner save the one in which the devil was placed. Then, carefully avoiding the train, he emerged from the hut, crossed to the gate and repeated the same process, spreading the inflammable fluid all round the rockets and detonators there, and taking it to the walls of the stockade, where he again threw the contents on the woodwork. That done, he put the drum down, and placed the lamp close to the bags of gold.

"Mind," he said, lifting a warning finger, as he stood in the light, "you each take a bag and go. You leave the lamp burning, remember that. I shall want it to fire the train."

It was time to move. By now the moon had sunk completely, and dense darkness reigned over the surrounding forest and the neighbourhood of the stockade. Our hero looked closely at his men. There was an air of suppressed excitement about them, but he could see no trace of fear. Indeed, these miners had already proved that they possessed courage, and though they were not like their countrymen, for ever practised in the arts of war, yet they had fair knowledge, as their behaviour had already shown. Each carried a rifle in his hand, while a bag of cartridges dangled across his

shoulder. In addition, the short sword which every Ashanti man wears, hung from the waist, ready for hand-to-hand fighting. They sat on the ground in a circle, talking in whispers and waiting for the signal.

"Time to move," said Dick, easily. "Open the gates, chief."

Silently and stealthily, as if they were so many ghosts, the party issued from the stockade, and soon our hero, the two chiefs, and Johnnie, were alone.

"Five minutes after the first shot is fired you will move," said their young leader. "It will take three more to reach the crest, and then——"

"It shall be cleared," whispered the chief, with determination in his voice. "My comrade and I have sworn that we will slay all who lie there. Trust to us to do the deed without a sound, and to return in time. We will make sure that none are left to spy upon us."

Five minutes passed slowly, and still there was no sound. Though the four peered from the stockade, intent upon piercing the darkness, and observing the movements of their comrades, there was nothing to be seen. The ground outside might as well have been untenanted. It was trying work waiting there for the sound of a shot. The seconds were like minutes, so slowly did they seem to go. Dick could hear his own heart thudding, could hear the deep breathing of the chiefs, while ever and anon the weak rays of the lamp showed him the white of Johnnie's eyes, as he turned them towards the sky. Ah! It was a shout which broke the trying silence.

A shout of alarm, coming from the lips of one of the enemy. And quickly following upon it came the

sharp report of a rifle and a human scream, the cry of some unhappy native who had been hit. After that there was a medley of calls and loud reports. Shouts and cries of rage and excitement came from the enemy, rifles flashed and roared, while the muzzle-loaders of the Ashanti attackers bellowed as they sent their load of slugs towards the stockade. The air above the enclosure sang with missiles of every description. Angular pieces of lead and iron, bullets of excellent formation, ironstone pebbles and pieces of broken rock, hissed over the hut and stockade in answer to the fire of the defenders.

"Excellent!" said Dick, as he stared from the gateway. "They are doing well. If I were not aware of the movement being carried out, I should say that the garrison was making a sortie, or an attempt to break out, and that they were trying to find the weakest spot in the ring thrown round them. Listen to the calls of the enemy, and hark! there goes a whistle."

Above all the sound came the shrill signal, perhaps blown by James Langdon himself.

"It may be a recall to the men on the crest," he whispered. "Chief, it is time for you and your comrade to move."

"We go. In a few minutes you shall hear from us, white chief."

Dick turned to see the two brave Ashantis passing out of the stockade. In a moment they were gone, and, like their comrades, they made not a sound. He and Johnnie were left alone to listen to the firing and the shouts outside, and to strain their ears for some noise, a shout perhaps, the firing of a rifle, to tell them

that the chiefs had been discovered. But no signal came from the direction of the crest, they had no intimation of the fate which had befallen the plucky two, till of a sudden a figure rose at their feet, causing both to start back.

"I am sent by my leader," said a voice. "The crest is clear. There were two of the enemy there. They are dead."

Dick could hardly believe his ears, and the news took a load from his mind. If all was clear on the crest, then it was time to set the others moving. He swung round and addressed Johnnie.

"You stay here till the bags are gone, then follow," he said. "I am going to join our comrades in front."

When the black stoker looked again his master was gone, and with a sigh and a shiver of apprehension he sat down beside the lamp, and waited there in silence, for he and the Ashanti chief could not understand one another. As for our hero, he crept forward till the shots on either hand told him that he was amongst the men. Then he sought one of them and whispered in his ear, with the result that the miner passed to left and right, giving his comrades the message, with orders to pass it on. It was wonderful with what intelligence these Ashantis carried out their part of the work. They began to fall back slowly, firing at the flashes of the enemy's rifles, till they were within fifty yards of the stockade.

"Now begin to hold your fire," said Dick, and in a minute the shots lessened. Another five minutes and the men were slinking back to the stockade, while our

hero raced to and fro, firing his rifle repeatedly, so as to make the enemy think that the whole garrison was there. He fired, in fact, till his weapon was almost too hot to hold, and actually blistered his fingers. And then, when he judged that all must be clear of the stockade, and at the crest by now, he threw down his rifle and ran. Dashing into the stockade, he hardly paused as he snatched up the lamp, and went on pell-mell for the hut. Leaping the train of powder, he ran to the far corner of the building, and knelt beside the "devil." A jerk threw the lantern open, and in a second he had the candle in his hand. There was no time for hesitation, and at once he held the flame to the devil till it smoked and a few grains fizzled. But it did not fire at once. A little more heat was required, for he had overdamped the powder, and in his overstrung condition the extra time entailed in providing that heat was maddening. At any time the enemy might suspect. They might even then be within the stockade. He would then—— Ah! It had fired. The devil was well alight, throwing out its pungent fumes, till they gripped Dick's throat. He could move. The act was accomplished. The place was as good as fired.

He rose to his feet, stamped on the candle, and stole to the door. He would have been out in the open in another second had not something suddenly caused him to throw himself full length on the floor, where he lay in deep shadow, while just in front of him a few feeble rays from the spluttering devil passed through the door and showed him two figures. One was the half-caste, while beside him, bending low as they crept

across the compound, was a native, the glint from his enormous blade coming to Dick's eyes.

"A ruse! We have lost the birds," he heard the half-caste growl huskily, as if his anger were choking him. "But they are close. I know they are near us. Hah! Look there, chief. A fire. Look! a fire!"

They were quite close by now, and Dick saw them both start back. Then, as they caught sight of the spluttering devil and took in the situation, he saw them turn to run.

"A mine! A mine!" shouted the half-caste.

Leaping to his feet, he ran towards the gate of the stockade, the native abreast of him, and close on their heels came Dick, aglow with excitement. He was bent on escape. He felt the doors of retreat closing on him, and he was determined to get away. Suddenly James Langdon turned and gripped the native. Then he swung round, as if a thought had occurred to him, and he had realized that there was time yet to save an explosion. Indeed, that was his thought, and he at once ran back to the stockade. An instant later he saw Dick's figure bounding towards him in the darkness. He gave vent to a shout, and then crashed up against a boulder which happened to lie there, for our hero's fist had struck him full on the chest. The blow almost staggered Dick, too, but he recovered his balance in a moment, and, swinging round, dealt the native a fierce stroke on the chin, sending him reeling. After that he was off like lightning. He was out of the gate ere a second had passed, and, darting round the stockade, was soon clambering up to the crest. Nor did he halt till he had reached the summit.

"Rest a moment," said the voice of the chief. "I heard the commotion, and I am glad to report that the men who followed you into the place fled down the hill. See the smoke coming from the hut. And there are the flames. We will move when you are ready."

Some five minutes later the two set off for the forest, the native leading, for he knew the way well, and had this enormous advantage over his young English leader, that he could see on such a night so well that they never once found themselves in a part where the difficulties of the track baulked their further progress. Since the day on which the expedition had first arrived, Dick had often taken the short cut to the forest which the agent had then used, and he knew how steep and difficult it was in parts, and how much care it called for, even when the easiest descents were selected. Had he had to find his way down alone on this night, he would probably have broken a limb, or lost his foothold and rolled, certainly to be dashed senseless before he reached the bottom. Then, too, it was not a time for hurry, such a dark night as this. But they had no choice. They could already see the glare of the flaming stockade in the sky. They could hear the shouts of their enemies, and they knew, the native far better than did Dick, that already his countrymen would be on the track.

"Once in the forest we shall be safe, I think," he said, speaking as easily as if he had made no unusual efforts, though our hero was so short of breath that he gasped.

"Then we will put out all our strength to reach that place."

By now they were near the foot of the rocky hill, and presently they were running steadily across the level. At length they reached the edge of the forest, where they halted, Dick to throw himself on the ground and gasp there for breath.

"A fine bonfire for our enemies," laughed the chief, exulting now that he had left the worst of the danger behind. "How is it that there is no explosion?"

No explosion! The bomb had failed! Dick looked up suddenly, his fatigue forgotten in an instant.

"Perhaps we walked through the train and scattered the powder," he said breathlessly. "Yes, I fancy that must be the secret. But it may go yet. The oil should carry the flames."

A little later, when both were rested, there was a violent concussion in the distance, the report shaking the trees. An instant before, a mass of burning materials shot high up above the crest, while a series of loud explosions took place, as the rockets and detonators burst in mid-air. It brought a roar of exultation from the two standing beside the edge of the forest, a roar which changed as quickly into one of consternation. For however successful the bomb had proved, however well it had destroyed the stockade, and perhaps some few of the enemy, the flames it sent into the air lit up the surroundings and showed them that if James Langdon and his men had once been taken in they were not to be so easily caught again; and, moreover, that on this occasion they were bent on retrieving their misfortunes. For racing down the crest and across the open ground came some forty Ashanti war-

riors, their guns flung this way and that, and bare swords in their hands. They had discovered the direction of the flying garrison, and they were in full chase, coming like a pack of hounds who hold the scent and see victory before them.

"Lead!" said Dick, shortly, as they swung into the forest. "I have my wind now, and can keep up at any pace."

It was well for him that he could do so, for the track was not an easy one. Still there is no stimulus so strong as that which promises a swift and terrible fate to the one who lags behind. Dick knew what to expect if he were captured, and he went on without flagging. Briars and vines slashed him across both face and hands, lacerating the skin. Thorns plucked him by his clothing and tore it to shreds. He struck his knees against fallen tree-trunks, and his feet against rotting boughs. He plunged through narrow swamps and rivers, and dragged his legs through mire which threatened to hold him. And all the time the shouts of the hunters came in his wake. Talk of the music of the hounds! Dick learned during that wild dash through the heart of this dense forest to appreciate the bitterness of that statement from the point of view of the quarry fleeing for his very life. He knew now how the call of the pursuers made the blood run cold, how the yelp of Ashanti warriors made the hair rise, and the limbs stand almost still with sheer fright. Yes, he was the hare this time, and had there been a man at his heels, flogging him with a whip of knotted steel wire, or goading him with spikes, he could not have run harder. The perspiration poured from him,

Blood dripped from many a cut and laceration, while his breath came in short gasps.

"Hurrah! Him massa. Wait now, you young debil. Yo wait till I say go. Hold de fire till I tell yo. Hear? Can't yo hear dem fellers comin'?"

Once again did Dick learn to bless the sound of that voice. He dashed along beside the creek, saw the launch lying some feet away, and flung himself into the water. The chief followed suit without hesitation, and in a minute they were pushing out into the stream, the two fugitives lying flat upon the deck, breathless and exhausted with their exertions.

And close on their heels came the enemy, maddened with rage, bent on securing the whole party. As the launch slipped into the stream and rounded the corner, first one and then some thirty of the warriors came tearing along the path, their dark figures hardly distinguishable in spite of the fact that the sky was getting lighter. But they could see clearly. They caught sight of the launch, and with yells of fury made ready to follow and effect her capture.

CHAPTER X

A Native Fleet

"Yo's no need for to worry, massa," sang out Johnnie, severely, as Dick raised his head from his hands and looked along the deck anxiously. For the fact that it was empty, save for the chief and himself and three others, caused him sudden anxiety. "Yo's get de wind again, and Johnnie see um all right. Wait dar! Back um! Yo black boy ober dar, swing um round so!"

He was in the well where the engine lay, and as he gave the orders Dick saw by the light of the furnace that he had shut off steam. Then he waved to the man at the helm, and the launch gently fell across the stream. And there she lay, shrouded in darkness, and hidden from the sight of the pursuers by the bank round the angle of which they were congregated. But whether they could see her or not, the enemy answered James Langdon's shout with a volley from their muzzle-loaders.

"That's um. Fire away, you debils. See some fun soon. See what Johnnie and his broders do. Listen to um cussin'."

He roared with delight, for, as the reports of the

scattered volley subsided the voice of James Langdon again came to the ear.

"Wade in!" he called out in the Ashanti tongue. "It is only a stream, my brothers, and in that way we shall have them. They must not escape. They have all the gold with them."

"Yo watch!" said Johnnie, suddenly, as a series of loud splashes told that the enemy were attempting to carry out the movement. "You see fun now, massa. Hi, yo black boys! Fire de rifle."

It was laughable, ridiculous, but very wonderful after all, to see Johnnie there, giving commands in his quaint English, commands which could not be understood by a single one of the miners. And yet this little stoker had a head on his shoulders, and had shown that he was deserving of much trust. For if he did not know the Ashanti tongue, by means of many jerkings of his arms and a huge amount of energy he could explain his plans, and get the men to fall in with them. And now Dick could see that he had made good use of the short time given him at the launch.

He had had a clear half-hour, or a little more, perhaps, and in that small space of time he had lit the fire, had stacked the bags of gold, for they could be seen in the cabin, lying snugly under the light of the furnace, and had made his arrangements for defence. He had posted his men a little distance away, under the trees, just where they could cover the enemy with their rifles. They were lying in the boat selected for their transport, and in the bows one of their number cowered over the small brass cannon. He had seen a

gun before, that was evident, and his eyes gleamed with excitement. He put an arm out, clutched a bough, and moved the position of the boat ever so little. Then came Johnnie's excited shout, a spout of flame burst from nine or ten rifles, and then there was a short pause, followed by a flash, by the splutter of powder at the vent, and then by an appalling crash as the gun went off.

"Put um helm ober, boy! Now give um little steam. Gently! Back um!"

Above the screams of the enemy, the hoarse bellows of those who had escaped the rifle bullets and the buck-shot with which the gun had been loaded, for bags of these had been brought as likely to be the proper form of missile, the voice of Johnnie could be heard.

"Back um! Now, yo black debil in bow, hook um on. Throw de painter! Make up fast as wax. Now gib um steam. Go 'head. Gib um all she know!"

It might have been rehearsed. It was marvellous to think that all this had been arranged by a little fellow from Sierra Leone, employed as the stoker and driver of a steam launch. Dick was dumbfounded. But by now he was past expressing his feelings, and besides, he was so exhausted that he could hardly speak. He saw, however, that the chief command was in excellent hands for the moment, and, like a sensible fellow, he left Johnnie to conduct the flight till he had his strength again. And so he lay flat on the deck, listening to the shouts of the pursuers, getting now farther and farther away, to the husky voice of James Langdon, as he raced through the trees, and to the mutterings of the native at the engine of the launch.

Then he smiled, a grim smile of amusement and of exultation, for he had conquered. He had won the fight, an unequal one, to say the least of it, and here he was, thanks to the splendid fellows who supported him, steaming away from the mine without the loss of a single worker, with little to mourn for, and with sufficient gold aboard to pay all wages, and leave a very handsome margin with which to reimburse his employers for the burning of their few spare stores and their stockade. In addition, there would be enough to give a fine profit, and such encouragement that when things had quieted down and James Langdon's account had been settled, the mine would be worked again, and he, Dick Stapleton, would have certain employment.

"De beggar follow. Dey runnin' down in de trees. Berry well! We stop dat. Yo boys, back dere. Get um guns ready."

"Tell your men to load and fire into the trees when my comrade gives the command," said Dick, in the Fanti tongue, which all the Ashantis understand. "Now, Johnnie, tell me what you want, and I'll pass on the order. You will command till we reach the river."

"Tank you, massa," was the answer, as the little fellow swung round for a moment, showing a smiling mouth and two rows of gleaming teeth. "You watch, and see me gib dem pepper. Me gib dem fellows beans."

He cut the steam off just a little till the launch slowed down, and till the Ashantis on the bank began to overhaul her. Meanwhile all aboard the launch maintained silence. Then again the native stoker

shouted a command, and a hot musketry fire was poured into the forest. At the same instant the launch started forward as if she had been hit, and with the boat in tow went racing down the tributary. Nothing could stop her now. Bullets and slugs whizzed overhead, and a few struck the deck and the sides of the towing boat. But they could not arrest the flight, while the pursuers might shout and bawl as they liked. The launch sped on her way, causing the water to flood the muddy banks on either side, and disturbing more than one of the loathsome monsters reclining there. They came to a bend suddenly. She swung round it, dashed for an open reach, and shot out into the stream.

"Well done!" cried Dick, rising to his feet, and taking his post as leader again. "Very well done, Johnnie. You are a born commander. Now, put out into midstream and send her ahead. How's steam, my lad?"

"'Nough to bust um, massa. Plenty steam and heap coal."

"Then keep her going while I talk to the chief."

He went right aft, to where the leader of the miners sat beside his comrade, staring to either hand and discussing the flight with his friend. Within six feet of them, at the end of the towing rope, lay the boat, with ten men aboard her, all with rifles in their hands, eagerly scanning the bank from which the last shots had come. Overhead the sky was already distinctly lighter. The forest on either hand had receded all of a sudden, while there were evident signs of coming day.

Every face aboard the two boats bore the same expression of contentment, of pride, at the success of

their efforts. There was even a sterner look, as if many of the men would have delighted in another brush with the enemy.

"Never fear," said Dick to the chief, "there will be more blows to be struck yet. We have miles of river to traverse, and if the Ashantis are on the war-path, it is more than likely that we shall have to run the gauntlet of a few of them. What do you think, chief?"

"We shall meet them on the Prahsu," was the answer. "There will be more trouble both for us and for the English chief. As for these others who have just attacked us, they are beaten. They may cover their heads and seek women for attack after this. Men will laugh at them. The two hundred who are to follow will surely cut them to pieces if these remain to tell the tale."

"Then we can take it easily now. We can reserve our coal, and prepare for this other meeting, chief. Why should we not run down the stream at night, or at least down that part known as the Prahsu?"

"The scheme is a good one," was the answer, "and for the white chief and his servant it will be as well to act as you say. For us there must be a different arrangement. Has our brother thought of the fate which will come to men of Ashanti should they land on the far bank some miles down this river? There the cowardly Fantis live, and with them we are forever at war. They would kill us most certainly."

Dick had not thought of that before, and the news came as a shock to him. If that were the case, and these miners from Ashanti would be in danger lower down the river, where would they be safe? In Elmina?

"Then we shall have to part, I fear," he said, after some minutes' thought. "The Fantis swarm lower down the stream, and though some might be friendly, others would soon make an attack upon you. Where can you go?"

"There are villages in our own country where we shall be secure, white chief. Already the fighting men will have left, so that our coming will not be noticed, and there will be none strong enough to harm us. Then, as the warriors return, we can leave. When all is quiet we will go to the mine and commence work again, for you will return?"

"I should say that we shall do that without a doubt," answered Dick. "The gold obtained has been abundant, and my employers will come again when the country has grown quiet. Perhaps this trouble will die down rapidly, and we shall be back in a month or two."

"You may, and yet I doubt it, Englishman. This war has been the thought of my countrymen for many years. They long to reach the coast, to have their own town there, where they may obtain supplies and guns. Yes, we know that, for we have listened to their talk. And besides, our brothers are born to fight. In times of peace they have little to do, and so it happens that we are forever quarrelling with those who live near at hand. A few, like ourselves, are trained to mine, and the king keeps us free from interference. We are necessary, for with gold the king buys guns and powder, and in our country it is a law that every nugget found goes to him as tribute. The dust belongs to the diggers, while those who dare to conceal

the nuggets, even if they be only as small as the smallest bean, are taken to Kumasi and sacrificed. Thus, as I said, we can return to the villages, and we shall be safe so long as we can keep away from the war parties. For they will know that we come from the mine, and doubtless the king, having declared that he will fight the Fantis and the English, has given orders for all who worked there to be slain or taken captive."

"And how do you propose to avoid these war parties?" asked Dick, anxiously.

"In this way. We will steam on till we are clear of these cravens who attacked us, and as the moon grows near we will tie up under the bank. Then, if our white chief agrees, we will serve out the dust, each man taking what is due to him. Then we will dive into the forest, and will make for Kumasi. Trust us to keep away from the fighters."

"While I shall have to run down-stream alone and escape them if I can."

"We would gladly come with you," said the native, "but it would mean death to us. If the white chief desires it we will come."

"No. I will go alone. You have done splendidly," said Dick. "You have proved true and more than brave. I shall report that to our employers. We will steam on for a little while, and then we will serve out the wages. Later we shall hope to meet again at the mine."

Little did Dick guess that this river would be dyed in many places with the blood of men ere the country was quiet again, and that the forests and woods would echo to the cheers of British soldiers ere King Koffee,

the arrogant and bloodthirsty potentate of Kumasi, would consent to withdraw his fighters. He did not know that even then telegrams were speeding home to England, that the situation at Elmina and at Cape Coast Castle was serious in the extreme, and that nothing but war and rumours of war were in the air. Little did he dream that he was still within the nest of a hornet, almost the only man of his colour still alive so many miles from the coast. How was he to learn that thousands of warriors were on the march, and that the forest paths were teeming with men of Ashanti? It was enough for him to remember the danger from which he had escaped. The memory of it, and of the successful defence and escape, filled him with glee, and he looked forward to the brush which he might have on his way down the Pra with a light heart which defied all thoughts of failure.

Two hours later the launch ran in to the bank, and was moored under the trees. Then the books showing the amounts due to the miners were produced, for Dick had had the care of these, and had sent them to the launch in one of the bags. There was a pair of scales also, and very soon the portions were separated, four ounces of gold going to swell each little heap, as a special reward for the manner in which the men had fought. Then each of the heaps was sewn up in a piece of canvas, and secreted upon the person of the owner. The remainder of the dust was stored in the cabin again, and, that done, the launch put out from the bank, and ran to the far side of the river. Then, with many a cheer and shout, the Ashanti gold-miners —excellent fellows all, and very different from their

warlike brethren—stepped ashore, and made off into the bush. Dick and Johnnie felt quite lonely when they had gone. They pushed off into the stream and steamed away.

"Better leab um boat behind," said the native, suddenly, after some minutes' silence. "Suppose hab to run, den boat hold um back. P'raps mean um dead."

It was an excellent idea, showing again that there is wisdom to be found in a native, and that Johnnie, for all his quaint looks and merry ways, was a thinker.

"We'll do so certainly," said Dick, at once adopting the advice. "Look for a spot where we can hide her, and which we can pick out again should we require her. It must be on this bank, too, so we will keep within easy distance."

It was not until an hour had passed that they hit upon a suitable place. Then, at a nod from the leader, the launch swung in closer to the bank, while Johnnie ran to the stern and drew in the painter. He ran the native craft up alongside the launch, and hopped lightly into her. Then, as Dick put the propeller astern—for the stream ran fairly strong here—the native pushed off, and guided the boat into the shallows. There was a massive tree there—a species of fern, growing to the height of thirty or forty feet perhaps, and dropping its abundant spreading foliage like an umbrella all round till the tips trailed in the water. Johnnie pushed boldly in, and Dick could see the big fronds shaking. Then he edged the launch closer in till her nose dipped under the leaves, and he heard her grate against the side of the native craft.

"Got um fast front and back," sang out the native.

"No move um, whateber happen. She fill wid water, and not sink. Tree hold um up nicely. Yes, and no one know um dere. Whole army pass, and neber guess. Golly, massa, de berry place!"

"And one to find easily," answered Dick. "Now, hop along, and let us get off. We've plenty of steam, and I think we'll put her hard at it. The tales of these warriors of King Koffee make me uneasy, and I'm anxious to get down to the coast."

Very soon Johnnie appeared from amidst the leaves, and they pushed off into the stream till they reached the centre. And there they remained throughout the day, reeling the miles off rapidly, for they had the stream to help them.

"We'll keep on without a single halt right down to the sea," said Dick, as he sat on the edge of the engine-well, eating a meal which the native had just cooked. "We know there will be a moon, and now that the river is broader we shall be able to see easily. We'll chance sandbanks, and hope that none will come in our path. By to-morrow morning the natives should be left behind, and we should be within reach of friends. Good coffee, Johnnie. You are a capital hand at other thing besides making war!"

The native stoker grinned his delight as he turned to face his master.

"When me so high me learn to cook," he said, with a merry laugh, holding his hand out some three feet from the deck. "In my country de women and de children see to de food while de men smoke and sleep, and get strength for de fight."

"A queer way of getting up one's muscle," laughed

our hero. "Just fancy training for school sports, or a gymnastic competition, in a similar manner! One would be rather soft, and hardly in the best condition."

"Dere where Johnnie learn to fight," went on the stoker. "Me go out when me not yet a man, and in de first battle me kill an enemy. He rush so"—he clambered from the well, and demonstrated the method of attack with such energy that the launch rolled—"he make stroke at Johnnie's head,-and miss um mark, golly! by de inch. Den me answer. Me hit wid all de strength wid um club, and he go whop! He fall dead on de ground. Den me take um head, and shout de war cry."

He made another attempt to bring the last in reality before his master, and set the forests ringing. Dick clapped a hand over his mouth, and pushed him into the well.

"Steady, my lad," he said. "There may be an Ashanti army within hearing of that call, and then what will happen? Spin your yarn if you wish, but do it quietly. How's steam?"

A little abashed, but yet glowing with the memory of his victory, the native stepped to the gauge and read off the pressure. Then he shovelled a heap of coal from the bunker.

"Come night, and not see so well," he said. "Hab plenty ready to run wid."

About three hours after that, dusk began to fall, and for a little while the fugitives were compelled to lie in close to the bank of the river, for it was densely dark. But the time passed pleasantly enough, for Dick had his pipe alight for the first time since the previous day,

and as he smoked it, watching the glow of the bowl, and looking across to a similar glow proceeding from the clay gripped between the white teeth of the native, his thoughts returned to the stockade. He went over all the scenes again, his nearness to James Langdon, and the luck he had had then. His successful attempt to reach the stockade, and the desperate fight he had had on the way. And, later, the retreat, with all its numerous incidents. He was still thinking of it when the moon came up in all her splendour, flooding the river till it was almost as light as day. And then, for the first time for many an hour, he looked at himself, and was horrified. His hands were cut and scratched in all directions, as doubtless was his face also. His clothes hung in ribbons about him, while, by the stains upon the breast of his coat and upon his shirt, one would have thought that he had been badly hit. But that he certainly was not; and now he remembered how the wretch who had first attacked him outside the stockade, had fallen under his own sword—fallen against the one who struck the blow.

"Time to move," he said, springing to his feet. "Steady ahead. More. Let her have it."

The native grinned. He wiped his hands with a piece of waste extracted from his pocket, and then opened the throttle. And once he had the launch moving at full speed he leaned back in contentment, watching his master with one eye, while with the other he looked at the smoke curling up from his pipe.

An hour later, as they swung round a bend in the river, and came into a long, straight stretch, a cry of amazement escaped them. The water on the left bank

was black with native craft, while the hubbub of some thousands of voices came to their ears. But that was as nothing to the shouts which greeted the appearance of the launch when she came into the straight. There was a deafening burst of shouting. Tom-toms and drums were beaten in all directions, while the deep note of many a native war-horn was heard. For crossing the stream was one division of King Koffee's army, *en route* for the Fanti country. And of this division, amounting to some ten thousand men, not more than a tenth were on the water, for there were insufficient boats within a radius of many miles to carry more. The passage was being made by detachments, and the first crossing had just commenced. That there were more of the warriors ashore Dick quickly learned, for if there had been shouting from the men on the water, the noise from the jungle was vastly more pronounced. And then the firing commenced, though the launch was beyond the range of the cheap, Birmingham-made guns owned by the natives. Still, the loud reports issuing from the bush were sufficient to show what was happening, while any doubt that there could possibly have been was set at rest by the manner in which the surface of the river was struck and thrashed by the bullets. They splashed in all directions, bullets ricocheting and screaming, slugs and buck-shot of native manufacture dropping heavily into the water, while the numerous pebbles which were fired sank out of sight at once.

Dick smiled grimly, once he had overcome his first feelings of consternation and astonishment. He stretched out from his position at the tiller and caught up a rifle. Another movement and he had three of

the weapons at hand, for there was a good supply on board. And while he held the tiller between his knees, he jerked cartridges into the breeches. As for Johnnie, his mouth had opened in one vast expression of astonishment as the natives came into view, and for an instant he had changed colour under the dark pigment of his skin. Then, glancing at his leader, and seeing how he was engaged, the little fellow gripped his pipe the tighter and threw himself upon his shovel. The door of the furnace swung open with a clatter, and Dick heard the grating of the shovel on the narrow iron floor of the engine-well. A flash lit up the stoker's figure, and Dick caught sight of a roaring fire, quenched a second later with a mass of coal. Then a dense volume of black smoke swept out of the low funnel and went trailing overhead till it merged with the clouds and the trees. He glanced at the pressure gauge, and by the help of the moon saw that it stood at sixty. Johnnie turned to it also and pointed.

"Hab plenty more soon, massa," he said. "Make water bubble and fizz. Boiler go bur-r-r-r-r wid de pressure. Chimney velly hot. Golly! Look at um!"

"Time to think about a shot or two," answered Dick, quietly. "Get a couple of rifles and some cartridges, and load. Keep them handy to the engine. Then go on stoking. By the way, have we a fender aboard?"

"Big one forard, sar. Where hab him?"

"Right on the bows, rather low down. Slippy, my lad."

They had little time for chatter, and both knew it. The native crawled on his hands and knees along the

deck, and swung a large rope fender over the bows, securing it on the very stem of the launch. Then he ran back, and the furnace door swung open again. By now the steam pressure had risen to sixty-four, and the needle was slowly jerking up. The funnel vomited even more inky-black smoke, while flames and small particles of coal flew into the air, the latter raining down on the deck. Meanwhile the natives had not been idle, for after the first shouts of surprise, and the salvo of bullets and slugs, the whole mass of canoes had set off across the river to intercept the launch. The consequent confusion can be well imagined. There were then screams and shouts of anger. Boats became locked together, and Dick saw some of the crews striking at one another in their rage and in their anxiety to get clear of their neighbours, and have a share in the capture.

"That gives us a chance," he said. "If they had started from the outside line there would have been no doubt about the issue. Now it's touch and go. They may be lined across our way, or they may not. Depends on the crews. As for their firing, I don't care a rap about it. Those guns don't carry overfar, and from what I saw at the stockade I should say that at a little more than a hundred yards one would only experience a heavy blow. At fifty the slugs would penetrate. Hullo! I don't like those beggars."

As he spoke there was greater commotion amidst the canoes, all of which were now under weigh, while those on the outside, the river side of the fleet, had broken clear of their comrades and were pushing for the centre of the stream. This, however, was not what attracted

Dick's attention, and drew the remark from him. It was the sight of two native craft of larger size which suddenly pushed from the shadow of the bank. They were crammed to overflowing, and carried big crews, who knelt in a line along each side. In the centre stood the warriors, shouting and gesticulating, and fighting their way through the mob. Small consideration did they give to those who were in their way. Dick saw the warriors strike at their comrades with the butts of their firelocks, and watched as more than one of the smaller craft was overturned. Then he sat down and took up a rifle.

"A shot might help," he said quietly. "How's steam?"

Johnnie pointed to the indicator and looked proud.

"Hab plenty," he said. "Stoke um more and perhaps um bust. Plenty steam in de biler."

"Then get your rifle, and aim at the rowers in the first of those two boats. Don't leave her alone. Keep on all the while unless you have to stoke again."

"Not want to. Hab plenty steam and big fire," answered Johnnie, with a satisfied nod. "Not hab any more coal till half-hour. By den p'raps not hab steamer."

"Perhaps," answered Dick, with a smile. "We're going to see to that. Out with your rifle."

Still gripping the tiller between his knees, while he sat on the edge of the well, he took a long and careful aim at the first of the paddlers, the one who set the stroke to the boat, and pressed the trigger when the sights were on him. Instantly there was a howl of rage, and the man dropped back on to the rower behind

him, while the whole lot came to a halt. But it was only for a quarter of a minute. One of the warriors who stood close by lifted the body and hove it overboard without ceremony. Then he seized the paddle and thrust it into the water. Crack! Dick's rifle broke the stillness which had followed the shout, and the man who had just knelt crumpled into a mass, the same disorder following.

"Five hundred yards I make it," said our hero quietly. "Give them a full sight, Johnnie, and aim for the centre of the body. Ah! A good one. I think you hit the side of the boat first, and then the man. They don't waste time aboard those craft, and human life does not seem to be over-valuable."

By now the launch and the fleet had sensibly decreased the intervening distance, the latter making directly across the river Pra, while the former raced down the centre of the river. It had become more than ever a question of time, and the thought made Dick redouble his efforts. And thanks to his shooting, the progress of the two war boats was greatly delayed, his bullet singling out the leading paddler every time the place was filled, till there was a panic in that part of the vessel. Then suddenly an unexpected thing happened. The two aboard the launch had taken little notice of the firing which still went on from the bank and from a number of the canoes, and which was of greater danger to the enemy than to them, for the range of the enemy's firearms was inconsiderable. Now, however, a shot attracted their attention. There was a louder report than usual, and a bullet of large size sped from the fleet, and striking the funnel, bored

clean through it, the puncture being plainly discernible by the flames and smoke which instantly emerged. Dick started forward, till he was stretched across the after-well, the tip of the tiller in his hand, and almost at once there was a second shot, followed by a heavy thud behind him, and finally by a splash out in the river. He turned to find the tiller loose in his hand, splintered by the missile, the fracture of the shaft having taken place an inch or two in front of the slot cut for it in the rudder. The steering gear was cut adrift, and as he looked at the shaft in his hand the launch went off her course. She shot to the right, away from the enemy, causing a scream of rage to rise from a thousand throats. Then, as suddenly, she swerved to the other side, till those aboard her were almost rolled into the water. She seemed to see the enemy before her, for she took the bit in her teeth, and, with her propeller thrashing the water behind her, went directly towards them, a bow wave splashing up on either hand. And then the tone of the Ashantis changed. Whatever they were, they were men of courage, and not to be frightened by a monster of this sort speeding down upon them. They had, for the most part, never seen a launch before, and those who had, had probably never seen one in full flight. Yet they did not flinch. They stood in their boats, and such a shout of triumph went up that the woods rang and rang again. Then their guns opened with a vengeance, and a perfect storm of missiles hurtled towards the launch. They did not stop her. She did not seem to notice the bullets splashing on either hand and tumbling on her deck. The launch had got out of hand, and as if she were tired of

life and roused to desperation by the pressure of steam which she carried, she went on her mad course, rushing down to doom and destruction.

CHAPTER XI

Running the Gauntlet

"THAT stoking bar, Johnnie! Quick! For your life!"

Dick could not wait to explain, for the situation was one which demanded instant action. When he had recovered from his amazement at the result of the unlucky shot from the forest, and had seen that the tiller was broken, he had no time to reflect that but for the movement which he had made a moment before he would have been killed by the very bullet which had wrought the mischief. Action, instant and effectual, was required, and his eye had at once sought for a substitute. Suddenly he remembered the iron bar used for stoking the fire, and as he shouted for it he prepared to place it in position. With a bound he was on the deck right aft, and kicking the butt of the fractured shaft from behind, shot it out of its socket. Then he gripped the rudder post and twisted it with all his strength, contriving to head the launch for the centre of the stream. Two or three seconds later the native was beside him, and as Dick held the post the bar was pushed into the socket.

"Hab um now! Get over oder side plenty quick. Put um over, massa."

Dick did so, with a heave which again caused the launch to roll till water spurted through her scuppers, while the two aboard crouched on the deck and held on for their lives. Then he set her on a new course, turning her head diagonally across the stream.

"Get to the rifle," he said sharply. "And first lay mine here so that I can grip them. That's right. Crouch in your engine well so as to avoid the bullets. Do you hear? Go!"

Johnnie's eyes had asked a question. He had as good as said to his master when the caution to sit in the engine well had been given, "And what massa do? He not crouch. Plenty ob cover for Johnnie, but what about massa?" But Dick brushed aside his question with one word, and proceeded to fix the bar between his knees, as he had done with the wooden tiller.

"Let 'em shoot at it again," he said, "and I guess the bullet won't do much harm. In any case it was a fluke, and not a bad attempt to pot me. Hah! That got one fellow. I shall have to play with these men."

As he ran the launch across towards the far bank, slanting her down stream all the while, he had seen that the fleet of canoes was now spread out across the river, and though there were fewer of their boats on the far side, and a narrow opening still remained there, yet the path to the sea was barred. He therefore steered for the far side. But a plan to get free was forming in his brain, and he watched for a chance to carry it out, his eye riveted on the two war canoes.

"It's those fellows I want to dodge," he said. "I wonder how we should fare if we ran into one of them."

He was thinking of charging one, and measured the size of the stout launch against that of each one of the native craft.

"We're about the same length," he said, "and as to weight it's a toss-up. She's crammed with men, and we've engines and a boiler aboard. There's nothing in it. All depends on how we hit her. All right!"

There was something ominous in those last two words. They meant much, and the quiet way in which the helmsman of the launch looked round, the set expression of his face, showed that he meant to choose well and make the most of his opportunities.

"We've steam to drive us, and plenty of it," he thought. "That gives us an advantage."

Once more he put up his rifle, and for three or four minutes peppered the enemy. But on this occasion he directed his shots to the boats at the far side of the river, now very close at hand.

On the part of the enemy there had been a wild endeavour to close in as the launch, with her tiller shot away, ran down towards the near bank, and this rush had resulted in some of the craft being upset. Then, as Dick fitted the iron bar and steered away again, a still madder rush was made for the far side. And in this the two war canoes were hardly as successful as they had been. They were too much hampered by their comrades, and so it happened that they were separated widely from one another, one only being well on its way across the stream. The second had barely

reached the middle, and as he fired Dick turned his eye to it every now and again.

"We shall have our chance," he thought. "She's got away, and as she paddles faster than the smaller fry, she's leaving an opening behind her. I'll give her a minute more, and then——"

"See that boat?" he called out to Johnnie. "Well, watch. I shall swing round in a few seconds and steer in behind her. Let her crew know that you have a rifle. Keep at it without ceasing, even after we've passed, for I have to work the tiller. Ready? Over she goes!"

He might have been running his launch in a regatta race, so calm was he. There was a smile on his face, for Dick had long got over the sensation of fear which the sight of the enemy had at first caused him. The difficulty with the tiller had roused him, and now, for the life of him, he could only look upon the whole adventure as a race, a race, it is true, which meant life or death for him, but one nevertheless which stirred his blood and brought all the sporting instincts of the Englishman within him to the surface.

"A close thing. Any one's game!" he said, as he swung the tiller over, and turned the launch on her heel, spinning her round till the water on either side was white with foam. "Now for it!"

The little vessel had obeyed the movement of her new tiller with remarkable celerity. She might have been a torpedo boat by the way in which she behaved. She felt the pull of her rudder, and as if she were a living thing she spun round in a sharp curve, the weight of her engines and deck hamper causing her to roll

heavily. Then she righted as she ran, and her nose sought for the narrow opening left in the very centre of the fleet. It was a most exciting moment. The air trembled with shouting, while if there had been a hail of bullets before, there was a torrent now, aimed with all the carelessness of the native, some overhead, some astern, and some even into the middle of comrades. And to these one rifle responded—that of the native stoker. He lay in the engine well, his head nicely clear, and his snider spat out a stinging rain which caused many an enemy to fall in his boat, or overbalance and slip into the river. But though he jerked the cartridges from the breech as rapidly as possible, he could make little impression on the crew of the war vessel. At the first movement of the launch there had been a shout, and as if by magic each one of the paddlers got to his feet and changing round knelt again. Then the paddles dipped and the big craft came surging back.

"She'll be across our track!" sang out Dick. "Get below, Johnnie. Keep down! look out for those who manage to get aboard the launch."

At once the native slipped completely into his engine well, where he lay, rifle in hand. As for our hero he could not afford to take cover just yet, for he had to direct the course of the launch. And magnificently he stuck to his post. A slug struck him on the point of the knee as he sat, and caused him anguish. A second, fired at the same close range, thudded against his ribs and dropped to the deck, while another from the same discharge carried away his hat. But he stuck grimly to the tiller. His eye was glued on the war vessel,

and he watched her like a cat. She was just beginning to cross his track, but the angle at which she moved would bring the two boats almost alongside one another, and then——

"They would hang on and be aboard before we could look round. No, thank you. We'll try some other plan."

The muscles in his steering arm were like steel bands. There was a look of determination on his face. He moved the arm with a sudden jerk, and sent the launch over when she was within thirty feet of the enemy. A second later he was bearing down upon her broadside. Then, indeed, there were shouts. The natives saw their danger and paddled furiously in the vain endeavour to alter their position. But they had no chance, for the steersman aboard the launch, conscious of the superiority which steam gave him, countered every move instantly. It was a matter of seconds. He was within five feet of them, going full speed. The natives saw now that they had no chance of coming alongside, and Dick watched them drop their rifles, draw their swords and crush to the centre of the boat. He moved the tiller again, ever so little, and bore right down upon the huddling group. Then he dived into his well and sat on the boards, one hand still gripping the tiller, while the fingers of the other sought for his revolver.

Crash! The launch shuddered, and stopped on her way. But she had weight behind her, and her frame was of sound construction. Also she was running at full pace, and her propeller never ceased to grip the water. She moved again, rose at the bows for a sec-

ond or so, and then subsided again, to the accompaniment of shouts and the sounds of splintering wood. Dick heard the scraping as the native boat passed beneath the keel, and there was a gentle thud as the propeller blade struck a portion of the wreck.

"Right over her! What luck!"

That was all he could say, for other matters engaged his attention. Of the huddled group in the centre of the native boat half a dozen had managed to gain the launch, while their comrades were already far behind struggling in the water. And these men who had been able to reach her had not all contrived to get aboard. Two reached the deck of the steam craft at once, while the remainder clung to her side, and were now clambering up, no easy task considering the speed of the vessel. A rifle cracked and one of the men aboard fell on his face. Then Dick saw Johnnie lift his weapon again and aim. He pressed the trigger as the man leaped to one side. As he opened the breech and stretched out for another cartridge, the native ran at him waving his short sword above his head. Dick's arm went up from the well, he rested the muzzle of his weapon on the edge, and took a rapid aim. A moment later the Ashanti fell headlong across the boiler, while his sword clattered on the iron floor of the miniature stokehold.

"Soon settle um hash!" shouted Johnnie, as he leaped to the deck and ran forward, armed with his shovel. "Hah! off yo's go. To de riber wid you."

He leaned over the side, and one by one he beat the Ashantis into the water. Then he returned to his

engine, and our hero heard the furnace door open once more.

"Steady," he called out with a laugh, which showed the relief he felt. "Go easy, my lad, for we are out of the wood, and must husband coal. How's the store?"

"Plenty black stone, sar. Steam from here to Cape Coast Castle, I tink. Golly! Um hot!"

He groped in the pocket of his greasy jacket and produced a piece of waste with which he mopped his face. Then he turned his attention to the enemy and put up his rifle. Dick followed suit, and together the shots rang out.

"That's where the big gun is," said Dick, as he fired at the second of the two large boats, from which had come the bellow of the large piece which had accounted for the fracture of the tiller. "That fellow has got hold of an elephant gun, I think, and he is making good shooting. Whereabouts is he?"

"You watch, Massa Dick. You see dat man near far end of boat? Dat de feller. You watch um while me pot. See um go splash into de water."

There was a malicious gleam in Johnnie's eye, for a second or so before the hopes of escape which filled the minds of the fugitives had been suddenly upset by the boom of the heavy piece owned by the enemy, and by the hum of a bullet along the deck of the launch. There was a steady arm holding the gun, and had they but known it this native was one of King Koffee's chief marksmen, an old hunter from the interior, who held a high place in the army mainly because of his prowess with the rifle in question. And the boat in which he

sat, or knelt, was not so far behind that he was out of range, or even nearly so. Indeed, barely a minute had passed since the launch had overrun the first of the big war boats, and had sent her to the bottom. It was only a few seconds since Johnnie had plied his shovel to such good effect, and the enemy were still at close quarters. Nor were they minded to permit these audacious strangers to escape so easily. A yell, a discordant shriek of indignation had gone up as the launch dashed into and splintered the native craft, and that had been followed by a babel of shouts, by the clash of many a war drum, and the blowing of horns, while instantly the whole fleet had swung round and had followed, their guns pouring slugs after the launch. Dick could see them clearly, the paddlers plying their blades with terrific energy, and the fighting men standing or kneeling, ramming charges into their muzzle-loaders in desperate haste. Then had come that boom followed by the hum of the big bullet.

"Dat de man," said Johnnie, as he held his rifle to his shoulder. "He just 'bout to stand and fire um gun. See um drop de villain."

At once our hero's rifle went to his shoulder, and, having waited to hear the snap of his comrade's, and note that he had failed to hit the mark, he pressed his trigger gently, holding his weapon as rigidly as the trembling of the launch would allow. Instantly there was an answering report from the native boat, and he felt the breath of the shot as it raged past his cheek and flew on ahead. Then the man who had fired staggered, drew himself up and, holding his huge weapon

above his head, toppled and fell like a stone into the river.

"Got um! By gum! but dat a fine shot! Johnnie's no good. Bad. Velly bad. Hear um shout. No more pills ob dat size come after us."

"It was a lucky shot and may save our lives. The beggar meant potting us, and there is no doubt that he was a fine shot, and knew his weapon. If one of his bullets had hit either of us I imagine that we should have been killed instantly. It must have been like a young cannon firing a very big charge, for did you see how the recoil shook him?"

The stoker nodded emphatically. "Not like shoot such gun often," he said. "Make shoulder sore. But what massa do now? Stop here and fire, so as make dem sorry dey get in de way?"

"No, thank you," was the dry answer. "I have seen enough of these Ashantis to last me for a long time. A more fierce and cruel lot of beggars I never saw before, and you don't catch me waiting to fight with an army. We might burst a steam-pipe or break a connecting-rod and then where should we be? Look at that beggar lying over the boiler, and think whether you would like to become a prisoner."

"No, tanks, massa," grinned Johnnie, casting his eye at the native. "But s'pose we move 'um. Him berry fine feller, but though him dead him not like de heat. Golly! Make 'um hop to put de finger dere, on de biler. Him cook nicely if we leab um."

Things had occurred so rapidly that neither had given a thought to this matter before, but now that they had killed the most dangerous of their enemies,

and the battle with the army of Ashanti had developed into a chase between a steam launch, with ample power, and a fleet of unwieldy boats, they had time to look about them, and to observe their own condition. As the stoker had said, the native who had fallen to Dick's revolver-shot lay across the boiler, and it was more than hot there, for out in this tropical country there was no great need for lagging (a covering of asbestos and wood, often held in position by sheet iron, and commonly applied to boilers in this country to help to retain their heat, and so make steaming easier), and this launch boiler was exposed to the air and weather. In consequence, the unhappy wretch who had fallen was literally cooking, and Dick was thankful when his dusky companion caught the body by one arm, and dragging it to the side hove it overboard. Johnnie had little sentiment. An enemy was an enemy, whether dead or alive, and he made no secret of his delight that here was another native who had fallen to their weapons.

"Good-bye yo," he shouted, as the body splashed into the river and sank from sight. "Yo foolish man come aboard dis vessel. Not hab invite to do so, and not wanted, not 't all. So jest yo go' 'way 'gain. Yo hab self to tank for all dis trouble."

He turned to Dick with a laugh, which was not lessened when he saw the serious expression on his master's face. For Dick had his own ideas as to how an enemy should be treated, whether dead or alive, and had the task been his he would have endeavoured to do the work decorously. But he had to admit to himself that one of these Ashantis, when dead, was a repulsive-

looking object, and that Johnnie was probably justified.

"What does he care?" he asked himself. "He has, no doubt, still a large share of his savage nature left, and he knows that these men would cut him to pieces when alive if they could capture him. So he treats them, dead or alive, with the same ferocity. Well, we've cleared decks, and I'm not sorry. As for those beggars behind, they might just as well stop and save their powder; they cannot hurt us more."

There was little doubt on this point, for since the native with the big elephant gun had toppled overboard, hardly a shot had reached the launch, though showers of slugs cut up the water in the rear. It was the turn of those aboard the launch to smile and enjoy the situation. As they ran down the stream, with the throttle now half closed, for steam might be wanted for another emergency, they could look back at the fast-receding fleet of boats and take full stock of them. Also they could watch the dusky figures bounding through the bush, some still abreast of the launch or even farther down the stream. They could jeer at the frantic shouts, could wave back jubilantly to the angry signals of the enemy, and they could afford to mock at the men who tore through the jungle, firing aimlessly into the water.

"Good as firework!" laughed the light-hearted Johnnie. "Moon not so bright now, me tink, and de gun go pop! pop! wid a splosh of fire. Fine sight, massa! Make de heart young and gay."

"Because we have something to be thankful for. But don't you make any mistake about the action, my

lad; it was a close thing, a precious close piece of business, and if it hadn't been for that gap, why, where should we be? That reminds me. How are we for'ard? What's the damage?"

The native leaped from his well and went scrambling along the deck, the movement giving cause for an increased outburst of shouting and beating of the drums; for the enemy still watched the retreating launch like cats, hoping against hope that she would stop, that their fetish, to which they sacrificed victims innumerable during the year, would step in in time to arrest the flight and hand over the white man. Presently Johnnie came back with a piece of wood in his hand.

"All dat remain," he said, with a laugh. "De bow hit right into boat, and brake um. Dis stick to de fender. Noding hurt. Launch same as before, only bullet mark eberywhere, I 'spect."

"Then we'll look to ourselves. What damages, Johnnie?"

"Golly! I forget um. Tink soon be killed by dem debils and den no matter. But feel um now. Look dar! Johnnie kill dat man if he catch um! What he want to fire so to spoil de beauty? Johnnie's wife not like dat 't all!"

Here was a genuine grievance, and the native made the most of it as he showed Dick his wound. For a slug had struck him on the cheek, just below the orbit, and had lacerated the flesh, so that there was every prospect of much scarring; while the bleeding, as in all face wounds, had been excessive, and his coat and breast were covered with blood.

"An honourable wound," said Dick, with a chuckle,

for this little native amused him vastly, and considering his want of good looks, it was rather amazing to hear him talking of lost beauty. "Honourable scars, Johnnie. You will be able to point to that wound and say to your wife and friends, 'Johnnie get that when he fight whole Ashanti army. Yes, he hab one man only wid him. He fight army alone and kill plenty. Den he wave de hand and leab.' How's that, Johnnie?"

They sat opposite one another now, the enemy almost forgotten, and they laughed till Dick had to hold his sides. For the expression on the stoker's face as Dick took note of his grievance was ludicrous. He looked surprised and grieved at first, and then utterly indignant. Then, as our hero proceeded with the tale, he saw his point, and commenced to smile.

"Yo make um ache, massa," he cried. "Yes, Johnnie say all dat. He forget. Dis wound show him to be brave man. He fight whole army, alone. He kill heap. He glad dat man hit um here. Dat man friend of him for life!"

It was natural that the two should make the most of the matter and enjoy it to their heart's content, for the reader must recollect that a few minutes before death stared them in the face, that for a quarter of an hour the odds against their escape had been desperate, and that during all that time they had been working with hand and brain and fighting at full pressure. And as if the danger had been a stone hung about their necks by a cord, it had dropped now that the cord was cut. They had burst their way through the band swung across the river, and they had killed the most dangerous of their enemies. The relief was immense,

and they showed it by giddy laughter, by gripping hands, and by shouting and gesticulating.

"You stuck to me like a good 'un," said Dick, in grateful tones. "Had you funked we should have been taken. I will report to Mr. Pepson."

"And massa save Johnnie. Look at man me jest throw to de fishes. He kill me sure as egg if massa not fire. Fine shot. Big sportman, massa; and Johnnie say so to all de town when him back. But what part you hit? Look! Blood here and dere, and dere. Eberywhere!"

He held up his hands in consternation, for our hero was indeed in a sorry plight. He had been little better than a scarecrow after his dash through the bush, and his escape from the stockade, and the few hours aboard the launch had not improved matters. He was as black as a sweep, for the soot from the funnel had played upon him as the launch bounded forward, while the perspiration had helped it to adhere. Then he had been struck in no fewer than six places by the slugs of the enemy, and in each case his tattered clothes told the tale. Not that the bleeding had been severe. On the contrary, none of the slugs had penetrated far, and in three of the wounds there was merely a large red bruise, now getting more discoloured. The skin had not been broken, and where there had been penetration it had been so slight that the missiles had fallen out into his clothing. Still one cannot stop a slug without feeling the effect, and Dick felt as if he had been playing a very hard and rough game of football. He limped owing to the wound on his knee. When he breathed he suffered considerable pain, for he had had

a hard rap over the ribs, while his shoulders were so stiff from a wound just below the neck that he might well have fallen in the scrum and had half a dozen lusty fellows tumbling on him.

"All's well that ends well," he cried cheerily. "And that reminds me that I'm hungry again. I have come to the conclusion that fighting is hungry work. What stores are there, my lad?"

"Find plenty, sar. Massa say tree week ago, 'Yo go down to launch and put dis and dat aboard. Den s'pose nigger come 'long, all right for us. Get to launch and steam 'way. Hab grub to fill de tumock.' Johnnie plenty hungry, too."

"Then off you go and lay a spread. I'm ravenous."

Thanks to the fact that the engine well and the one aft from which the steersman guided the launch were close together, the two comrades, for they were that on this occasion if on no other, were able to see to the management of the launch and enjoy a meal at the same time. The attack they made upon the food which Johnnie brought from the cabin was almost as fierce as that which James Langdon had made upon the stockade. They washed the repast down with good hot coffee, which Johnnie made at the furnace door, drawing water from the river. Then they lounged in the easiest position and smoked, the stoker his short clay, which one so often sees gripped between the shining teeth of negro stokers, and Dick his briar, at peace for the time being with all the world, content with the good fortune which had befallen him.

"I've a good report to hand in," Dick said to himself, as he reflected. "The mine has been disturbed, but

that was not my fault, and from what I have heard and seen since, I fancy those at the coast will not be surprised at the news. I rather expect that they will hardly hope to see me again, for these Ashantis seem to have gone out to war rather suddenly some little time ago. But the mines are good for the future, the wages are paid, and the men will return when the time comes, and in addition I have a valuable cargo of gold dust and nuggets. Good! The gains are gold dust, and one steam launch saved. The losses are a stockade and two native boats, one destroyed and sunk up the creek to keep the Ashantis from using her, and the other hidden, useless to us for the time being."

It was pleasant to think of his success, and he passed the hours till dawn came, wondering what would happen at his meeting with his employers. And as the moon waned the dawn spread over the sky, at first a mere rose pink blush, the promise of a fine day. Then the sun got up and peeped at the wanderers out of the river mist, till it looked like another moon. Three hours later the increasing width of the river warned them that they were now approaching the mouth, and presently they were amidst the sandbanks and upheavals of mud which form its delta. Dick still clasped the iron make-shift tiller in his hand, and looked wearily for the central passage, while Johnnie now and again stoked his furnace and looked mechanically to the indicator and the water-gauge. For they were both utterly done up and weary. They had been awake and active for many hours, and the flight and the fight with the natives had helped to exhaust them. It was therefore with little show of excitement that Dick

nodded ahead and pointed to a ship lying off the mouth of the river.

"British war vessel," he said sleepily. "What's she doing here?"

"Tink she make signal to us, sar," said Johnnie after some minutes. "She wave de flag and send dem aloft."

"And there goes a gun. Looks as though she wanted to speak us. If she'd give us a bed, where we could rest without caring about the launch and our store of gold, I'd be thankful. I'd be asleep in a jiffy if it weren't for the thought that I've a big store aboard, and that it might be stolen. Hullo! It must be a signal for us."

They were still some little distance from the war vessel, which lay to, at anchor off the coast, rolling with the swell. And as there was no one else about and no other vessel, it seemed more than probable that the flags were meant for the man in command of the launch. But how was Dick to tell when he knew nothing of the signalling code? However, his doubts were soon set at rest, for a figure in white suddenly leaped on to the rail of the vessel, and held a big speaking trumpet to his lips.

"Launch ahoy! Launch ahoy!"

Dick waved his grimy hand.

"Come alongside at once. The Commodore wants to see you. Where are you from? Have you seen any of the enemy?"

"Enemy! Then they did know of the trouble at the coast. Perhaps they had already had a brush with the Ashantis."

Dick stood up in the well and waved again. Then

THEY SIGHT A BRITISH WAR-VESSEL

he steered the launch towards the gangway, while Johnnie, awakening to the fact that he was about to run alongside a man-o'-war, with all its sparkle and polish, managed for a few seconds to summon sufficient energy to look to his engine. He rubbed with energy at the metal work till the launch was almost alongside.

"Stand ready," cried Dick, sleepily. "Hook on. Steady. Back her. Stop her!"

They were hanging to the broad gangway of the war vessel, while a sea of faces looked down upon them. A British tar, bearded and full of strength, stood in his white ducks at the foot of the ladder, his bare feet splashed in the water, while he stared at the strangers in amazement. Up above Dick caught a fleeting glance of a sentry, all in white, marching to and fro under the awning, and looking as though he would have given much for the privilege of leaving his beat for one glance over the side. Then his eye focussed itself sleepily on two officers leaning over the rail, both with medal ribbons upon their white coats, while one carried his speaking trumpet.

"Where from?" he asked politely. "We've recently had a brush with the natives. Can you give us news?"

"They've been in the thick of it," suddenly exclaimed the other. "Look at the young fellow. He's covered with blood, and the boat's cut to pieces; the sides are in ribbons. Why, it must be young Stapleton, about whose safety there has been such a commotion."

"And the fellow's done, done altogether," said the other. "Who are you, sir?"

"Dick Stapleton, sir. Just got through from up

country. We met a whole army, about to cross the Prahsu. We got through with some difficulty, as they were already afloat. We're dead beat, sir, but I can't sleep till my store of gold is looked to. It's worth something. Can you help?"

Dick was weary and done up. He had realized that long ago, but the need for effort had kept both pluckily at their posts. Now, however, with the all-protecting arm of the British Navy to watch over them, the desire for sleep was irresistible. Their eyes were more than half closed. And they winked suspiciously when they attempted to look at any one object for long.

"Sergeant of the guard! Put a couple of men aboard at once," came the order. "Mr. Hilden, oblige by going down to the launch and making an inventory. Glad to see you, Mr. Stapleton. We'll talk later. Meanwhile come aboard and leave the gold. It shall be well taken care of. Help him up, my man, and bring him along under the awnings."

A friendly and firm arm helped Dick from the launch, while another tar took Johnnie in charge. Our hero was almost carried to the deck above and was straightway popped into a hammock. Then some one held a glass to his lips. He drank, and at once fell asleep. He had earned a rest and determined to enjoy it.

CHAPTER XII

In Home Waters

"'Ello! Awake, me 'earty! Blow me, but you've jest slept the clock right round! What time o' day is it? Nine o'clock, or thereabouts. 'Taint no use a givin' it to yer in bells, 'cos you ain't no sailor. You've slept the clock round, Mr. Stapleton, and you've laid there since yesterday mornin', a-sleepin' like a infant. 'Twasn't no use a-tryin' to stir yer up, though the skipper—the Commodore that is—did 'ave a try. 'E's jest jumpin' to get yer news about these darkies. But yer wouldn't stir. Yer jest kind er growl, and then yer was off agin. Swop me, but yer must 'ave been tired!"

"I was—dead beat," agreed Dick, looking out from the hammock, and noticing that he was aboard the war vessel, and still lying under an awning. Indeed, at first he could recollect nothing, not even the fight with the Ashantis, to such a point had exhaustion carried him. And now, when he stirred and opened his eyes, it was to see a burly sailor, a British Jack tar, staring at him with a huge smile on his good-humoured face.

"Thet's jest what the skipper says. He sees it

ain't no use a botherin' yer, and so 'e jest leaves yer to it. 'Put a nurse on him,' he calls out to the chief. 'See as 'e's taken care of.' And so 'ere I am, actin' kind of nurse. 'Ow do yer feel, Mr. Stapleton, sir?"

"Hungry! My word, I am hungry. You say I've slept the clock round. Then there's no wonder that I want something. How's the launch?"

"Safe and sound, sir, and the gold, too. Swop me, but where did it all come from? You must 'ave been busy to dig all that. But you're 'ungry. I'll send down to the gunroom. Officers is 'aving their breakfast, and there'll be a peck for you."

He was an amusing fellow, this rough salt, and a capital nurse he had made. He went to the rail of the upper deck, and sang out to the sergeant of the guard, a marine, whose man paced the beat below.

"Mr. Stapleton's compliments," he called out. "He's awake and feels mighty hungry."

Dick heard the sergeant turn away, and then crawled from his hammock. Only then did he look at his clothing and his hands, and he was horrified, for he was still the grimy object he had been when, twenty-four hours before, he had come aboard the vessel. He was stiff and sore all over. He limped to the rails, and looked down on to the lower deck. Scores of marines and sailors were tumbling up, chattering and calling to one another, and amongst them was Johnnie, as lively as a sand-boy, and quite at home with all the crew. Indeed, he was in a small way a hero, and had made the most of his wakeful hours, yarning to the tars. Dick nodded down to him, and returned the salutes of the men as they touched their caps to him.

Then he turned red under the grime, for a lusty fellow jumped to the railings and seized his cap.

"Three cheers for Mr. Stapleton, the gentleman what's jest come down the Pra all alone," he cried. "Three of them, boys, and heartily!"

"Silence, please. Higgens, direct Mr. Stapleton to the spare cabin and see to him. Thank you, lads, we like to see a plucky act recognized."

It was an officer who spoke, and at his word the men gave another cheer and departed, while Dick, still somewhat overcome at the honour done him, followed the mess servant who had appeared, and went down to a cabin. Here he stripped off his rags, and was invited to pass through a narrow doorway to the bath. When he emerged, dripping and feeling wonderfully fresh, there was the mess servant waiting to give him a rub-down, and to help him to dress, for his shoulders were now excessively stiff, while his knee was very painful. He was, in fact, sore all over. But his joy at being amongst friends was great, and he made light of the pain.

"Mr. Hilden's compliments, sir, and he thinks these garments will be about the size. He hopes you will make use of them."

The servant, who was one of the marines, held out a suit of white, and Dick gladly availed himself of the clothing. There was a complete change of linen also, and when at length he hobbled from the cabin he was looking spruce and neat again—a clean young Englishman, modest of manner, well grown, and with that air of quiet determination which is so common to young men of our race, and which sat so well on him. No

one would have thought that this young fellow had been up-country in a responsible position, and that he had so recently had such a tussle with the natives.

"What shall I do with these?" asked the servant, politely, smothering a smile as he pointed to Dick's discarded rags.

"Throw them overboard, or burn them, please," was the smiling answer, "and—er—er——"

"James, sir."

"Well, James, is there anything——?"

"Breakfast waiting, sir. Yes, sir. This way. The officers are waiting."

He led the way to the gunroom, and in another minute our hero was limping across the polished boards to where a long table was placed between two of the guns. There were a dozen officers there, more or less, and they at once rose to greet him.

"Glad to see you about again, Stapleton," said one, who looked as if he were the senior. "Let me introduce my friends. Officers of H.M.S. *Rattlesnake,* Mr. Stapleton; Dick Stapleton, I think."

He said the last with a pleasant smile, while Dick bowed to those present.

"Dick Stapleton, I think," repeated the officer. "We all know that. The ship rings with the name. That dark fellow of yours has been telling some secrets. Let me congratulate you. It is seldom we hear of such an escape, and it is fine to come across a young fellow who, alone up-country, has been able to hold his own so handsomely. 'Pon my word, you've done well."

Dick went as red as the cummerbund about his waist, and felt horribly confused. Then, at the invitation of

the officers, he sat down, and forgetting all else for the moment enjoyed the good things put before him, and the excellent company in which he found himself. For there are none jollier than naval officers, none more hospitable. Their gallantry has long, long ago been proved to all the world.

"As soon as you are ready we will go to the Commodore," said the officer who had before addressed himself to Dick. "I may say that he is simply itching to hear your news. You see, it's important. We've had a brush with the natives, and it has been a nasty business. There's a big disturbance going on, and the war has regularly started. We expect Wolseley here very soon—General Sir Garnet Wolseley, you know. A fine soldier, and just the officer for a job of this kind."

Dick opened his eyes in astonishment. He had already gathered that there was some trouble afoot. Indeed, when he sailed up the Pra with Mr. Pepson there had been ugly rumours in the air. Some had warned the members of the expedition that it would be folly to go just then. Others had said that there was always trouble threatening; that it was a condition which had become practically chronic on the Gold Coast, and that King Koffee was always a thorn in the flesh, feared by Fantis and white men alike, and always liable to make a raid on the coast. So it had been for a long while, and he who hesitated to march into the forest on that account was weak. But from his own experience he knew that they had actually gone on the war-path, and now he heard that the Navy had had an action with them.

"And there is to be a regular war?" he asked in amazement. "Sir Garnet Wolseley is coming, and troops, too, I suppose?"

"Yes, there will be troops, and some are already here. It is to be a regular invasion. This fellow, King Koffee, has become too troublesome and too formidable. His men are here on the coast, and the neighbourhood of Elmina is in his hands. We are in a tight corner, and shall remain so till the reinforcements arrive. Then we shall march to Kumasi and burn the wasp out. That's it precisely, Mr. Stapleton. This king thinks that he can dictate terms to the white men. He has a few captives, and thinks that because he beat a white force years ago, he can repeat the process. He wants a lesson, and we're here to give it to him. Have you finished? Please do not let me hurry you, but if you only knew the anxiety of our Commodore, I think you would forgive any undue haste on our part. Our Commodore has been fretting at the unavoidable delay. Of course you could not help that. Any one could see that you were dog tired. Yes, this way, now up the ladder and along the deck. Sentry, my compliments to the Commodore, and say that I have brought Mr. Stapleton."

A few seconds later the two were ushered into the wardroom of the *Rattlesnake,* and Dick found himself bowing before the Commodore, J. E. Commerell, V.C., C.B., who came forward to shake him by the hand. There were two other officers present, and it was evident by the expression on their faces that they were eagerly awaiting news from the interior.

"This is a serious business, Mr. Stapleton," said the

Commodore, motioning Dick to a seat at the wardroom table. "I heard that you have encountered an Ashanti army, and I have information that they were on their way to attack the Assims, a tribe friendly to ourselves. Tell me all about this meeting, please, and also what other frays you may have had with the enemy; for I have also had mentioned to me the fact that you have had more than one skirmish."

"I'll do my best, sir," answered Dick. "I went up-country some weeks ago with my employers and some Fanti boatmen. Also we took a native stoker, Johnnie, who is here now, and has proved a splendid fellow. We were attacked by Ashanti robbers on the way up, and our Fantis were in league with them. We beat them off and went on to the mine for which we were making. There was a stockade there, and as soon as we had settled matters I was left in charge of the place and of the miners. A few days ago, I cannot exactly remember how many, for after being awake so long and then sleeping the clock round I am rather confused —still, it is only a few days ago that the same leader who had previously attacked our boats, made an attempt to take the stockade, and failed owing to the pluck of the miners and to the watchfulness of Johnnie. But they hemmed us in, and we knew that they expected two hundred Ashantis to reinforce them."

"You knew? Excuse me, Mr. Stapleton, but how could you know that when you were, according to your own description, hemmed in the stockade? Did they shout the news so as to frighten your men?"

The Commodore leaned across the table, and put the question, while he looked closely at his guest. Dick

flushed again, for he felt ill at ease in this atmosphere of the wardroom, with officers listening so intently to his words.

"It was through an accident, you see, sir," he said. "It happened that when the attack was made, I was out in the forest scouting for the enemy, for we had seen a small force in our neighbourhood a little time before."

"Then you had taken precautions against attack, I imagine?" interrupted the Commodore. "You had set a watch, so as not to be taken unawares?"

"And yet they took me by surprise, sir. They came up from the other side, and as I was in the forest I did not know of their presence till I heard firing. Yes, we had taken precautions. Johnnie was on the watch at the stockade, and the men had been warned, and had been trained as to their action in case of attack. A tom-tom was beaten, and they simply ran to the stockade and banged the door. Then they peppered the enemy, with excellent results."

"Meanwhile you were in the forest, cut off from your men?"

"Yes, sir. But I managed to creep through during the night, and, thanks to the fact that I can now understand the Ashanti tongue and speak it a little, I learned of these reinforcements on my way through."

"And you got through without incident?"

"Hardly," admitted Dick, telling them quietly how he had been followed, and had had to fight for his life, and how he had been rescued when on the point of being dragged away to captivity. "After that we fooled them," he said easily. "We sent out a party to

the front, the direction from which their attack had come, while we made preparations to slink off in the opposite direction. The party retired over the hill with the gold, while I went on firing for a time. We had our launch in hiding in a creek some little distance away, and we got safely aboard her and set off down the river, towing the men in a native boat. Later we paid off our men and hid the boat. Then we steamed down-stream and had the bad luck to meet with an Ashanti army. They peppered us hotly, and, in fact, nearly cut us off. There were two big war boats which were the greatest danger, and aboard one was a native with a big gun, firing a heavy bullet. He shot our tiller away at a critical moment. But we used the stoking rod, and—and here we are."

"Quite so, Mr. Stapleton, here you are," said the Commodore, with a pleasant little smile. "But you will excuse me. As a naval officer, I would like to hear how it is that you are here at all. You had an army to contend with. They were in boats. There were two large war craft, and a man with an elephant gun, a small cannon in fact. Your tiller was shot away, and I have noticed that your funnel is perforated. Your boat is marked with slugs from bow to stern, and there are some pounds of slugs and pebbles on the decks or embedded in the woodwork. You had one stoker with you. Two for a crew to man the vessel and fight her. This requires a little more explanation."

Willingly would Dick have escaped further conversation, for the reader must recollect that he was unused to this official atmosphere, and felt more than

overawed by the presence of the officers, looking so keen and spruce. However, there were friendly smiles to encourage him, and he blurted out his news.

"Oh, we ran for the far side of the river, firing as we went," he said. "Then there was a chance. A war boat left a gap behind her and we slipped into it. But they can back their boats by simply turning on their heels and reversing their paddles, and so she came right across us. But we let 'em have it broadside on and crumpled 'em up. A few clung to us or jumped aboard, but we shot one or two, and Johnnie hit the rest over the head with his shovel. Then the fellow with the gun got our range again, and it looked a little nasty for a while. But we shot him, and then—well, here we are."

There was a hearty laugh at his words and at the obvious confusion under which he laboured. But the Commodore soon straightened his features and again asked a very pertinent question.

"If you please," he said sweetly, "who are 'we'? You say 'we' all the way through. We left the stockade; we paid the men off; we fitted the stoking bar as a tiller; we steered the launch over the war boat; and we shot the man with the gun when things began to look nasty. Do you mean that you and Johnnie did these things together?"

Then our hero was compelled to give the details, while the perspiration poured from his forehead. For if he was brave, he was undoubtedly modest.

"And now I will tell you what has happened here," said the Commodore. "But first I must thank you for very valuable information, and at the same time con-

gratulate you on your very plucky conduct. 'Pon my word, gentlemen, we should be delighted had he been one of our service. It would have been a fine feather in our caps to be able to send such a report home to the authorities. But now, my news. You may have seen some of us wearing slings and bandages. We have good reason for doing so, for three weeks ago we went up the river Pra to discuss matters with some of these natives who seemed inclined to be turbulent. They met us in a friendly manner, but higher up, as our boats were being towed closer to the bank and within easy range, an ambush of some thousand natives opened fire upon us. We were in a hopeless condition, for we could not attack, and could hardly retire. But we managed to draw away, and returned to the ship with many poor fellows injured. Later we shelled the town where the ambush had been laid and smashed it to pieces. About the same time some of our men were ill-treated by the natives higher up the river, and I regret to say that in all we lost four of our brave fellows, while twenty of us were wounded, including six officers. However, we are all recovering. But the range was close, and a blow on the ribs is no laughing matter."

The Commodore moved uneasily, and it was then that Dick noticed an unusual bulging of his coat and shirt, for in these hot parts all wore the lightest clothing. In fact, the Commodore had been very seriously injured by the murderous fire of the natives.

"There has been more trouble since," went on the Commodore, "but we have not had the worst of it. We have realized that the time for talking has passed, and

we have given these unfriendly natives a sample of our wares. We have shelled towns and villages where the people were hostile. But they are that everywhere. The bush swarms with enemies, and there can be no doubt that we are face to face with a war of moderate proportions. In that war, Mr. Stapleton, you will be able to play a prominent part, for you can speak both the Fanti and Ashanti dialects, and you have some knowledge of the country. I shall ask you to take a letter to the Lieutenant-Governor at Cape Coast Castle, in which I will repeat what I have just said. But perhaps you would rather not aid the troops; perhaps you will want to return home, in which case Her Majesty's forces will be the losers."

"I cannot say, sir," was the answer. "Till I see my friends and ascertain their wishes I am unable to decide. Indeed, I am not my own master. May I press on at once, for I am anxious to get to them and hand over the gold. Besides, when they hear of this trouble, they will be wondering what has happened to their mine."

"And I think also to the young manager who was put in charge. Certainly, Mr. Stapleton, you are at liberty to push on any time. I have had your launch replenished with coal, and provisions shall be placed aboard her. You will hardly need a crew, I should say, seeing that you have brought her all this way with one man only and have now no enemies to fear. But let me warn you. You must on no account put into Elmina. The neighbourhood is in the hands of the enemy. The Elminas there have proved false, and have thrown in their lot with the enemy. An attack

in force was made on the town and beaten off, five hundred of the enemy being killed. You would be fired on, not that that would matter much now, for you must be used to the experience, but it might be awkward. Push straight on for Cape Coast Castle."

He said the words with a friendly smile and a twinkle of amusement, while he gripped Dick by the hand. There was no doubt, in fact, that he was as impressed with the modestly described tale of Dick's adventures as were the crew with the lurid accounts which Johnnie had given them. And his comrades in ward and gun rooms endorsed his opinion. It was long since they had met with such pluck and determination, or with one who carried his honours so easily and unconsciously.

"It's what I like to see," said the Commodore, as his guest left the cabin. "No side, like some of these civilians of youthful age. No pomposity when speaking of the natives or of men in a lower station. Good sense all through. Politeness and good temper, which show the gentleman; and plenty of grit. My word, Hilden, a fellow in our service would deserve promotion for such conduct."

Half an hour afterwards there was a commotion aboard the *Rattlesnake* as Dick prepared to leave. A right hearty farewell was given him, and numerous invitations to come again, such is the geniality and hospitality of the Navy. The sailors and marines had again congregated on the deck, for they love to see an officer who has done well, and never spare their praise where it is merited. And down below, standing in the launch, was Johnnie, waving to his bosom

friends above, his short clay pipe gripped between his sharp white teeth, and emitting now the aroma of a different brand of tobacco, the powerful, far-penetrating scent of Navy shag, the smoke which tries the stomach of the raw recruits. Johnnie was unaltered in appearance, save that he had had a wash. A bucket and a piece of soap had transformed him sufficiently, and he stood there below in his old clothing, looking just as he did at the stockade, save that the garments were now more ragged and stained, while there was a huge rent extending up one leg to the knee. The wound on his cheek was there, covered with a piece of strapping, which gave it unusual and ghastly proportions. Johnnie was undoubtedly proud of that wound, and thought no more of lost beauty. He laughed and chattered, and seeing Dick about to descend, called out a final farewell to his late entertainers.

"Golly! you come all to Sierra Leone and see how Johnnie do for yo! Plenty eat, plenty drink, and all berry glad yo come. Dance and sing, play de banjo or flute. Yes, yo come, and Massa Dick be dere to meet yo. S' long, yo boys; glad we meet."

There was a roar from the deck above.

"So long, cocky. If yer get tired o' stokin' that 'ere kettle, jest apply aboard this here ship. Plenty of baccy and grub, cocky, and you'll be welcome. And, Johnnie," one of the voices suddenly broke in, silencing the others, "when yer come again with Mr. Stapleton, jest remember that quids is scarce aboard this here ship. Jest tip 'im the wink and bring aboard a few of them 'ere bags o' gold. We could do with a little extry pay and allowances."

That brought forth another roar, and a cheer as Dick took his place at the tiller, a tiller which now, thanks to the kindness of the Commodore and the skill of the carpenter, had been refitted.

"Cast off!" cried Dick. "Ahead. Let 'er have it. Sound that whistle, Johnnie."

They went away from the side of the *Rattlesnake* with a rush, and were soon steaming along the coast, increasing their distance from their late friends rapidly. Then they set their eyes towards Elmina and Cape Coast Castle, which they hoped to reach before night. Presently they sighted the fort at Elmina, with the native town and the expanse of cleared ground, precautions which the Dutch had taken against fever, but which, in spite of the example thus set them, and the crying need, the English had not yet attempted at Cape Coast Castle. Then they steamed on along the coast, rising and falling with the swell, while the music of the surf as it fell on the sandy beach came to their ears. In due course they sighted the huge, irregular erection known as the Castle, and very soon the launch was moored off the beach. Dick signalled for a surf-boat and in half an hour had reached the shore, taking with him his store of gold. There were plenty of native porters about, and he hired six, who at once took up the bags. Then the procession set off, and crossing the bridge which separates the native town from the European settlements, turned its steps towards the house in which Mr. Stapleton had lived. No one was out as the party arrived, so Dick had the bags piled on the edge of the verandah. He had a little money with him, and therefore was able to dismiss the car-

riers. Then he pulled at the bell, while he stood on the verandah keeping guard over the gold. There was a shuffling of feet, and a few seconds later a tall, slim figure emerged from the main room, and gave vent to a cry of amazement.

It was Mr. Pepson, gaunter than ever, with signs of suffering written on his face, which now showed the utmost astonishment and delight. Never had Dick seen him so betray his feelings. He almost shed tears, and gripped our hero's hand so firmly that the fingers ached. Meanwhile Dick noticed that something had happened to his employer, for he wore one arm in a sling, while there was a large strip of plaster at the back of his head.

"Another wound which I owe to the Ashantis," said Mr. Pepson, breaking the silence. "We were attacked and cut up. But sit down. I'm still very weak, and your unexpected return has staggered me. I never hoped to see you alive again, my boy. I have blamed myself over and over again that the desire to obtain gold from this mine should have induced me to place you in such a dangerous position. And you are wounded, too. Why, you are limping, and there are bandages here and there!"

Dick admitted the fact, for the surgeon aboard the *Rattlesnake* had insisted on dressing his wounds.

"But you, sir, and Meinheer?" he asked. "You were attacked?"

"Treacherously, and I grieve to say that the agent who was returning with us was killed at the first discharge. It was quite near the mouth of the Pra, and we thought that there was nothing more to fear. We

"OUR AGENT WAS KILLED AT THE FIRST DISCHARGE"

made a capital trip of it and everything looked well. Suddenly shots were fired at us from the bush, and a boat pushed out toward us. Our agent, as I have said, was killed at the very first discharge, while I was struck on the head, and was almost stunned. Still I managed to seize a paddle, and Meinheer did the same. We paddled for our lives, with the natives in hot pursuit. I hardly know how it happened afterwards, but think that Meinheer must have been cramped, and endeavoured to change his position. He slipped, fell against the side of the boat, and—well, you know his size and weight—it capsized us instantly, and we were thrown into the river. I never saw him again. He may have clung to the boat and been captured. On the other hand, it is more than probable that he went straight to the bottom. As for myself, I swam for the bank and scrambled ashore, receiving another wound as I left the water. Then I raced on into the bush with those fiends after me, and finally fell exhausted. But they must have given up the chase, for when I regained consciousness there was no one about. I was desperately fagged, but I knew that I should die like a dog if I remained there, so I plunged on through the bush, and finally hit the river. Then I came upon some friendly natives who brought me here. That's all, my boy, and I am more than grieved to have to narrate it. Poor Meinheer is gone, and if you had been killed also I should have been heart-broken; I thank Heaven that you are safe. Now sit down and tell me how you managed to win through."

"First of all, what shall be done with these bags?" asked Dick. "They contain gold dust and nuggets.

The mine was doing very well, and there were rich finds, so that I have been able to bring you a good return."

Again there was amazement on Mr. Pepson's face. He gazed at his young agent as though he could not believe his eyes and ears. Then he motioned to him to sit down.

"I care more for your story," he said. "The gold is nothing to me till I hear that. Sit down, and let me hear all about your doings."

It was late that night when the two turned in, and on the following morning, when the gold had been safely deposited at the bank, they resumed the conversation, for Dick had a question to put. His heart was in the country, and he desired above all things to see the war through. Besides, the idea of taking part in a campaign fascinated him, and he longed to go up-country to Kumasi with the troops.

CHAPTER XIII

On Special Service

"HERE is the letter, sir, which the Commodore gave me to carry to the Governor," said Dick, as he and Mr. Pepson took up the conversation of the previous day. "He offered me a post with the expedition which will be sent to Kumasi, and I declined it until I had seen my employers. What are your wishes in the matter?"

"That you should go," was the prompt reply. "My inclination at first when I returned here was to go back to England at once, for I began to hate this country. But I thought of you, and I stayed on the chance of your turning up. Now I think of Meinheer. I give you full permission to take this post, with the agreement that you still remain my agent, and draw your salary. That will be a retaining fee, for when the war is over I shall want you again. There, you are free to go, and I am sure you will do much for our cause."

That afternoon Dick appeared at Government House, a familiar place to him, and handed his letter to the Governor, who was delighted to see him.

"Of course we shall be glad to have you," he said,

"and I will send along an official appointment this evening, stating your pay and allowance. For the present there is nothing for you to do, save perhaps to ascertain from the natives what is the present whereabouts of the Ashantis. When Sir Garnet Wolseley arrives he will no doubt have work for you. You look thin and pale. Take a rest, my boy. A white man cannot work for so long out here in the forest without feeling the effects of the climate."

But Dick Stapleton was young and inclined at times to be foolhardy. He had the objection to remaining still common to every lad of his age. He loathed molly-coddling, and though at times he felt feverish, his stubborn nature would not let him give in, lest he should be thought to be shamming. And so, within a few days of his arrival back at the coast, he was exploring the mouth of the Pra once more, with Johnnie as stoker, and a crew of ten bluejackets from the *Rattlesnake,* all intent upon a brush with the enemy.

"Pending the arrival of Sir Garnet and the troops, you will do your utmost to obtain tidings of the enemy," said the Commodore, as he bade farewell to our hero. "And above all, Dick, no meetings with armies, if you please. You have as complete a selection of stores aboard as we could think of, and your crew are all picked men. Make the *Rattlesnake* your headquarters, returning here with news whenever you can."

And so Dick set off, in command of an expedition for the first time, and a proud man he felt, too, as he sat at the tiller, with his eye on his fine crew. But he had only ascended a very few miles of the river Pra

when he met with an enemy even more dangerous than the Ashantis. One morning, as he sprawled on the deck to eat his breakfast, he was seized with a curious sensation.

"What is there, Johnnie?" he asked listlessly, toying with the pocket fork and knife which all campaigners carry.

"Hot coffee, massa, berry hot; and golly! look at dem tinned sausages! Johnnie take dem from de tin jest now, and look how dey frizzle!"

Dick did look, and on another occasion he would have fallen upon the food with eagerness, for an expedition of any sort encourages a healthy appetite. But this morning, strangely enough, he could not eat. The sight of food sickened him. He pushed his plate away and took to his pipe. Even that did not please him. The taste was all wrong, and he sat down, looking dejected, for the first time for many a day. Then he commenced to shiver, till his teeth rattled together like castanets.

"'E's got it, sure enough," whispered one of the salts, an old hand on the coast. "This cruise 'as come to a end, chummies. Look at 'im shiverin'. It's a bit of bad luck, mates, 'cos 'e was the boy to show us some fun. Beg pardon, sir," he went on, coming to Dick's side, "but ain't yer feeling quite up to it? Let's feel yer 'and."

Without further ceremony he took the hand which hung listlessly at his young commander's side, and put his finger on the pulse, at the wrist, for this tar had had some instruction, and was an intelligent fellow. Then he turned to one of his mates.

"Fetch along that 'ere medicine pannier," he said shortly. "Now, then, open it carefully, and jest lift out that 'ere box. If yer please, sir, jest put this under yer tongue."

With deft fingers he produced a thermometer from the medicine chest, and placed it in Dick's mouth. Three minutes later he inspected it, while the look on his jolly face turned to one of concern.

"Are yer cold, sir?" he asked sympathetically.

"No; but awfully hot. I'm burning all over," was the answer. "And I'm very thirsty."

"And you've got a temperature. Tom Huggins there, 'bout ship; and, Johnnie, let 'er skip till we're out of the river. The orfficer's got a go of fever, and sooner he's aboard the *Rattlesnake* and at sea the better for him and all of us. I'll get yer a blanket, sir, and make yer comfortable."

They were all very good to their young commander, and took care of him as if he were a child, till they reached the open sea and espied the *Rattlesnake*. An hour later he was lying on the after deck beneath an awning, tossing with fever, and with an orderly from the sick bay told off to keep special watch and ward over him. For Dick had a severe attack. The responsible work at the stockade, the fear of a sudden appearance of the enemy, and the flight had all aided a notoriously bad climate. And at last he was down with malaria, which kept him aboard the ship for a month.

While he is lying there, with plenty of friends about him to see to his welfare, we will step aside for a little while, and review matters at the coast. War, for

war's sake, is seldom waged, except amongst savage tribes. And even with them there is usually some grievance, some cause which leads to the outbreak of hostilities. It may be that more country is desired, that the men of a certain tribe desire to take wives from another, or that some injury done to a nation or a race years and years before has left a feeling of bitterness and a desire for vengeance; a grudge is owed, and is paid back at the first moment when those who have sustained the injury are strong enough to fight. But Britain does not conduct her wars in that manner. The numerous little expeditions and minor campaigns upon which she is so often engaged are almost invariably the direct result of molestation from some race living on her borders.

For years, perhaps, she has patiently suffered the injury, hoping by diplomacy to put an end to the whole trouble. Then, when her patience is exhausted, and diplomacy has failed; or when the aggressors have become still more audacious, she finds that war is necessary, that nothing but armed interference will bring peace to that particular border. Too often her patience and forbearance have been mistaken by an untutored race for weakness, and thus it happens that the foes she has to meet are more numerous than they might have been. However, the history of these small wars is, as a rule, so very similar that one campaign differs only in detail from another. Troops are sent to the part, there is an invasion, and, most likely, severe fighting. Villages are taken and burned, forts are stormed, and men killed and captured. There may be a reverse, for one cannot hope for continued good fortune. But

persistence, good training and discipline tell in the end. The tribe is conquered, a fine is levied, and in numerous cases the British Commissioner left to aid in the administration of the country settles down peaceably, and a new order commences to reign. So much so that in time the very race which had been opposed to us begins to see some virtue in our friendship, and when another campaign takes place against some neighbouring chief, old enemies are united in the effort to subdue the common foe.

Britain had had trouble with the men of Ashanti before this time, when Dick Stapleton had been practically the first to have a brush with them. We had crossed swords with the Ashantis more than once, and with varying success; but, unlike other races, these men inhabiting the forest beyond the coast-line had maintained their independence and their bitterness. For they had always a cause for war, and as the reader will see presently, that cause had been increased since we acquired the town and port of Elmina from the Dutch. The Ashantis were at this time a powerful nation, for the most part trained to war, and it will have been gathered that, owing to the fact that there is ample gold in their country, they were a wealthy nation as compared with many others in a similar condition of civilization. Moreover, the commercial spirit was strong within them. They traded with the interior, and for many years caravans had passed to Kumasi across the country lying still farther from the sea, carrying products of Africa, ivory in large quantities, food-stuffs and cottons, and what was appreciated far more perhaps, slaves in plenty. And in return the

men who brought these caravans to Kumasi received gold dust, and the highly prized kola nut. Thus, it will be seen that the Ashantis were unlike many savage races. They were in friendly communication with far-off peoples, and, owing to the peculiar resources of their country, to the gold found there, and mainly to the kola nut, which grows in profusion, and which was then extensively cultivated, they were rich and prosperous. It was only natural that, with money to spend and a coast so near, they should desire to have a port where they could trade with other nations, and through which, in exchange for their surplus gold, they could obtain European goods, and, above all, guns and ammunition. For much wealth brings the desire for more. It engenders a feeling of pride and superiority in the savage breast, and it is hardly to be wondered at that the Ashantis, looking about them and comparing their own degree of comfort and civilization with that of their less fortunate neighbours, desired to increase their wealth. With guns and powder they could fight, and could conquer neighbouring nations. And with guns they could make sure of a port on the coast.

It will be realized that with her object gained, Ashanti would hardly look favourably upon any nation which attempted to put a stop to her coast trade, and there is no doubt that it was Britain's determination to arrest the import of guns and ammunition which led to the war which had now commenced. For the reader will recollect that Elmina had just passed into our hands, having been purchased from the Dutch, who had for very many years maintained a trade with

the Ashantis. Now, however, Britain, being in possession of this port—if Elmina can be given such a title—determined to put an end to the trade in guns, and indeed to all trade, till matters were satisfactorily settled with the King of Ashanti. For if he had a grievance, so also had we. For years we had been on bad terms, and now, when Ashanti armies were threatening the coast, and a demand was being made for free trade with Elmina, a request on our part met with refusal. King Koffee held certain Europeans as captives, and before we would discuss the question of trade with him, we desired the return of those captives, a request which was refused, a large ransom being demanded. Then followed negotiations, till King Koffee, a despot ruling over an extensive country, and with much hoarded wealth, lost all patience. He was a powerful king, he said to himself, and could put fifty thousand armed and trained men in the field. Why should he take "nay" from a race of white men living on the coast? Why should Ashanti be hemmed within her forests? She was powerful and could eat these white men up.

Promptly the armies were organized, and while Britain still dallied, the King of Ashanti invaded our protectorate. But still Britain held her hand, for this was a native war, and because the Ashantis had attacked the Fantis and other tribes, there was no reason why we should send troops to this notoriously unhealthy coast, and fight their battles. Thus it happened that matters at Cape Coast dragged on, while all trade with the interior ceased.

If the invasion of the protectorate had ended with

an attack upon the Fantis and other races, Britain might well have continued her policy of aloofness, for she had nothing to gain by invading Ashanti. She had tried to do so on former occasions, and had failed disastrously. And so she was minded now to leave matters till King Koffee and his armies had settled their quarrel with their neighbours, when perhaps there would be a satisfactory ending to the negotiations, and peace would result. Then trade would be reopened, guns and ammunition excepted, and the white men on the coast would have ample opportunities of reaping a harvest, for, as has been said, Ashanti was a wealthy country. However, matters did not stop at invasion of our protectorate. While Dick was at the mine, looking after the affairs of his employers, the forces of King Koffee attacked Elmina. They induced the natives of that town and other places bought by us from the Dutch, to join them, and Britain suddenly awakened to the fact that the enemy was at her very door, and that they meant to wage war with the white man. If there had been any doubt as to the intentions of the Ashantis, the attacks made by their friends and allies on the boats of the *Rattlesnake* were sufficiently convincing proofs. It was war, and Britain found herself, as is too often the case, utterly unprepared for it. But she girded on her sword, and preparations were pushed forward so as to enable us to drive the Ashantis back, and march on their capital.

That was the condition of affairs existing when Dick reached the coast, and it was only because of the isolated position of the mine that he had failed to hear earlier of the Ashanti invasion. There were few troops

at Cape Coast Castle, and few officers. There were practically no stores, and certainly insufficient to support an expedition. All was being prepared in Britain, while ships were loading every sort of item likely to be serviceable in the coming campaign.

Sir Garnet Wolseley, a brilliant officer, and one of our youngest generals, had been chosen to command, while a staff of officers had been appointed who would help him in the campaign and make success as sure as possible.

And now a few words more before we leave the subject of Ashanti history. Cape Coast Castle was settled by the Portuguese, and was ceded to the Dutch in 1641. In 1655 we captured it, and it was secured to Britain by treaty. Thus, at the time of this outbreak, we had been in possession for more than two hundred years. And what had we done during that time? The reader who is accustomed to the tale of British progress in our Colonies and India, in fact, in any part where men of our race gather, might well expect to find improvement here also. But such was not the case. Cape Coast Castle at this moment was much the same as it had been when we took it from the Dutch. No efforts had been made to clear the forest, and to provide an open space. The town was as unhealthy a place as could well be found. Trade flourished to a certain extent, but might have been vastly improved. And lastly, we might have encouraged the advances of the powerful Ashantis, and thereby gained a vast trade. We might have opened up roads to the interior, and dredged the rivers, thus enabling our own manufactures to find a market, and

in place of sending numerous presents to the reigning monarch of Ashanti, with a view to conciliating him, we might very well have made a treaty with him, whereby commerce might have been improved on both sides. Both those who ruled British affairs on the Gold Coast practised a short-sighted policy, with the result that we had come into conflict on at least four occasions with the Ashantis, and on nearly all these occasions the question between the two nations was one of commerce. The powerful Ashantis were impatient of the white man's interference. We blocked the way to the sea, and the people of Kumasi desired a free opening, by means of which they might exchange home products for guns and other items much in request by them.

And now the position was precisely the same, only the purchase of Elmina had brought matters to a head. King Koffee had demanded the fort there, claiming that it was his, and had been met with curt refusal. Then, it is said, our Governor on the Gold Coast attempted to interfere with the barbarous customs of the Elminas, a mixed race inhabiting the neighbourhood of the town. This people had never encountered difficulty on the same score from the Dutch, and they naturally resented the action. More than likely also they were bribed by the Ashantis. But, as has been seen, they promptly retaliated by throwing in their lot with King Koffee, and by inviting him to invade the protectorate. And that invasion had carried the Ashantis up to the very edge of Cape Coast Castle, and had resulted in a bombardment of Elmina. Then matters had settled for a time, and little was heard of

the armies of the potentate of Kumasi, till our hero rushed down upon them on the Prahsu. But for that chance meeting and the outrageous ambush laid for the sailors, those in authority at Cape Coast Castle would have still gone on with the comfortable thought that King Koffee meant no great harm to the white men. True, he had joined with the Elminas, and there had been an incursion of his armies to that place, necessitating an attack by the guns of the fleet. But he had since disappeared, and though complaints came from the Fantis and others that they were still suffering, there was no evidence of that fact at the coast. It seemed, indeed, as if the trouble were subsiding, and as if King Koffee realized the hopelessness of the struggle. It was thought that he would treat with the Government again, and would hand over the captives; then a treaty could be made with him, and trade be revived. Meanwhile it was risky to ascend the Pra, or enter the country of Ashanti. Think, then, of the astonishment of the officials on the coast when Dick returned with his news, when, added to the treacherous attack made upon the Navy, resulting in such severe losses, came definite news of a large Ashanti army on the Prahsu. And very soon the advance of this same army was reported by friendly natives, so that there could no longer be any doubt that serious trouble was impending. The eyes of those in authority opened very wide indeed. Already it had been decided that troops were wanted; but now that need was undoubtedly urgent.

When a month had passed, therefore, and Dick was again out of his hammock, the aspect at the coast had

changed. Where before had been peace and repose, was now the utmost bustle. The *Rattlesnake* had gone, and other ships had taken her place. Dick himself was aboard a hospital ship which had been sent to the coast, while in the roads, lying a mile from the shore, with swarms of surf-boats manned by laughing kroomen about them, were transports discharging men and supplies.

One in particular drew the attention of all eyes, for she was the *Ambriz,* African mail steamer, and she had just brought Sir Garnet, together with his staff. Dick looked eagerly at her, wondering whether he would be given an opportunity to meet this famous General, who at this moment had the honours of the Red River Expedition fresh upon him. He wondered, too, whether his appointment would meet with approval, and whether his duties would take him soon into the country of the enemy.

"I'm fit and well at any rate," he said to himself, as he leaned against the rail. "There's nothing like sea breeze to clear fever away, and though I own that I was as weak as a rat when I was transferred here, I am now, thanks to the excellent rations provided, as fit as I ever was."

"And depend upon it, you will soon be employed," answered a young officer, who stood beside him, and who, having volunteered for service, had come out with Sir Garnet, only to fall ill on the voyage and be sent to the hospital ship within a few hours of reaching the coast. "We shall all be at it soon, and I'm glad that I've had this attack now, and not waited till later. Hullo! there comes the Governor's launch."

They watched the tiny vessel steam away from its anchorage just beyond the surf opposite Cape Coast Castle, for, as has been explained, there was no harbour on this coast, nothing had been done to afford protection to even the smallest shipping. The launch stood away from the shore, and presently arrived at the gangway hanging to the side of the hospital ship. There was a staff officer aboard, and having ascended to the deck, and saluted the medical officer in charge, he descended with him to the cabin. A few minutes later he came up again, and his companion pointed to Dick.

"There he is," he said, with a good-natured smile. "I pass him as fit, and shall be glad to get rid of him, for, 'pon my word, the youngster has been the worry of my life. Every day he has pestered me to allow him to go ashore. Take him and welcome."

"Then, Mr. Stapleton, the General sends his compliments and desires that you will call at Government House and see his Chief of the Staff. Will you come now?"

Would he come at once? Dick smiled at the very idea, and ran below with all the eagerness of a boy. Soon he appeared again, spruce and neat in his white clothing, and stepped into the launch.

"Remember me, Dick," sang out the young officer, who had become friendly with him. "If there is a boat expedition or anything going, I am a volunteer. Ask to choose your own staff, and don't forget that I shall be keen."

Half an hour later the surf-boat had landed them, and our hero felt like a young horse which has been

conveyed oversea, and has not set foot on land for many a day. It was glorious to feel the sand under his shoes, to see the people moving about, the laughing kroomen, the native carriers, the mulattoes of the coast, the white men, English for the most part, with an occasional Dutchman, all busily engaged in checking stores. There were young officers, as young or younger than himself, in their shirt sleeves, with pith helmets tilted to the backs of their heads, perspiring freely, while they saw that the stores were correct. And everywhere, some under tarpaulins, some exposed to the air, were the stores, cases of biscuit, of rice, of pork, and of beef. Huge ovens for field camps, kettles of the standard army pattern, known throughout the service as "dickies." Bales of clothing for native levies, cases of the same for European troops, shells of regulation construction, swords which were sharp on one side and had a saw edge on the reverse, star shells meant to be fired high into the air and light up the surroundings, hand grenades and rockets. Dick even noted some barrels labelled "beads," a curious thing to find in such a place.

"For the niggers and their wives," said the staff officer, with a laugh. "That is the way in which we shall pay our way in some parts, though I fancy it will hardly take us to Kumasi."

There was a grim smile on his face as he said the words, and he looked closely at Dick.

"What is your opinion?" he asked.

"All depends on the force we have, and on the methods we employ, and the strategy adopted by the enemy," answered Dick. "If King Koffee leads his

troops against us and shows up in the open, he will be smashed to pieces. Our rifles would beat down his gun fire, while our shells and gatlings would send his men running. But it will be different."

"You have seen for yourself? You have been up-country, they tell me."

"A little. The forest extends for something like two hundred miles, and we shall have no choice but to fight through it. Whether we go by river or road to Prahsu, there we shall have to take to the bush, and it will be difficult work. A man can creep close to one and stab, while rifles are almost useless. Then there's the climate. But we ought to get to Kumasi if we have the troops."

"What I think and hope. But come along. Here's the office."

A few moments later Dick was ushered into the large, airy room in which the Staff held their meetings, and at once stood at attention, his hat in his hand. By now he had become used to official matters and people, and therefore he felt no nervousness when he discovered that there were four officers present, all of senior rank, while two at least were high up in the service. Instantly Dick's eye was riveted on the figure of one of these officers, moderately tall and exceedingly soldierly in appearance.

"Sir Garnet," said the other, motioning to him. "Mr. Dick Stapleton, of whom you have heard."

Dick bowed at the name and stood, awaiting the wishes of those who had summoned him.

"You are well and strong again, it is reported?" said the chief of the staff. "That is good news, for

the General desires some information. Do you consider that you are well enough to undertake another journey into the bush?"

"Quite," was Dick's emphatic answer. "I am fit and strong again now, and longing to be off."

Sir Garnet smiled. The chief of the staff smiled, while the officers present exchanged knowing glances.

"That is like your spirit," went on the officer, "but I wish you to consider this question before you reply, for the journey upon which we require you to go is one from which some do not return. We have news, more or less reliable, of the movements of the Ashanti armies, news which is sufficient till the troops arrive from England. But in the meanwhile we want to have particulars of the country beyond the Pra, from there to Kumasi, and if possible news of the captives and of King Koffee. Troops are expected at the end of the year, in two months perhaps. So you have that time in which to get this information. But you know, doubtless, the condition of the country. There are at least two Ashanti armies lying in the jungle, and perhaps there are others."

He ceased speaking and looked questioningly at the young fellow standing hat in hand, as if awaiting an answer, while he desired above all things to weigh his character, to see for himself whether he were indeed the lad of courage which the Governor had represented him to be, and whether he were a fit person to undertake an expedition of such danger.

"There will be no mercy from the Ashantis," he added, lifting a warning finger. "You have met them and you should know."

"When can I start? The sooner the better," said Dick, quietly.

"Then you will go?"

"Yes, sir, and I will get this information for you if it is possible. What men may I have? I'd like the old launch which I had before. She steams well, and has a stout hull."

"Choose your own staff and your own methods of proceeding," was the genial answer. "They tell me that you have patrolled the river before, so you must know what is wanted. Come and report here just before you leave. And, er—Mr. Stapleton, there will be a handsome reward for this information."

Dick was glad that he had heard that after he had accepted the task.

"After all," he thought, as he left the office, "I would rather work for the fun of the thing and for the good of old England than for money. If, however, there is a reward and I win it, why, all the better. It will be like winning a prize. And now for the preparations. I shall want to think it out."

He bade farewell to the staff officer who had brought him from the ship and went to see Mr. Pepson. A week later he set off on his hazardous journey to Kumasi, to the headquarters of the most ferocious monarch known to Englishmen, to the spot where everything was fetish, where thousands of slaves were butchered in the year, and where the sight of a white man was sufficient to rouse all the inhabitants to a condition bordering on insanity.

"Recollect, my dear lad," said Mr. Pepson, as he bade his young friend good-bye, "that King Koffee is

a wild beast, and that it would be better for you and your men to die fighting, or to shoot one another, rather than fall into his hands. Good-bye, and good luck."

He turned away to hide a tear, this strong man who so seldom showed his feelings. But he was deeply attached to Dick, and would gladly have kept him. However, this was duty, duty to his country, and he was forced to let him go. Then he turned and watched as the surf-boat took our hero out to his launch. There was the scream of a whistle, the waving of many hands, and Dick was off—perhaps never to return again.

CHAPTER XIV

A Brush with the Enemy

"We will look into Elmina on the way over to the Pra," said Dick, as the launch steamed along the coast, keeping just outside the rollers. "I have news of something, and want to inspect. Later we can go up the Pra and get this other information."

He was sitting on the roof of the tiny cabin, surveying the coast with a critical eye, while every now and again he turned his gaze to his crew with a feeling of satisfaction. For this was some reward for the disappointment occasioned by his illness. He was again on the move, with the very same crew, and in addition there was with him young Emmett, a youth some few months older than himself, tall and straight, and now entirely recovered from the sickness which had prostrated him and sent him to the hospital ship *Simoon*.

Jack Emmett was just the sort of fellow to take our hero's fancy, for he was a genial, high-spirited lad, fond of a joke, and still keener on seeing some fun with the enemy. So far he had done nothing more than inspect the Gold Coast from the sea, for he had

fallen ill on the voyage out. But he was eager to meet the enemy, and more than that, Dick found that he took a great interest in the coming operations, intelligently following the movements and preparations on our side. More than all, he had a huge admiration for his young leader, who had in so few weeks managed to meet with so much adventure.

"What is this news?" demanded Jack, for up till now Dick had kept his counsel to himself. "It is new to hear that we are to make into Elmina. Are there any Ashantis there?"

"You will hear," was the answer. "This I can tell you, that Sir Garnet has had a big palaver since he reached the coast, and called in all the kings of the tribes under British protection. Some came in all state, with umbrellas and tom-toms, and with the accompaniment of rattling bones and war-drums. Others stayed away, and sent defiant answers. Those fellows live in the neighbourhood of Elmina, and it struck me, when I heard the tale, that they would hardly have dared to act as they have done had there not been some sort of encouragement."

"I follow the argument. Then you think——?"

"That the Ashantis are somewhere in the neighbourhood. Yes," responded Dick. "Let's talk to Johnnie."

He sang out for the native stoker, who relinquished his firing shovel, and came trotting along the miniature deck, still clad in his tattered garments, and still with the clay pipe of which he was so fond, gripped between his teeth. But there was a little difference. Johnnie had added dignity. His was a proud mien, and when-

ever he stopped to speak to a white man or even a black nowadays he always turned his right cheek to the stranger, for there was the scar, livid and red against his dusky skin, an honourable scar which told of fighting, of a battle in which his master had gained a name, and he, Johnnie the stoker, a proportion of the glory.

"Massa call," he said, raising his hand to his battered cap after the custom of the seamen. "Johnnie here. What yo want?"

"Repeat this tale of Elmina," said Dick, quietly. "Tell this officer what you told me."

Johnnie greeted the youth beside his master in similar fashion, with an elaborate salute, and treated him to a critical survey.

"Johnnie know little ting or two," he began, with a knowing smile. "He 'tend dat he no good, like same as many at de coast. He say, 'Hate white men, and wish Ashanti here.' Johnnie know dere heaps of spies at de Castle, and he listen and open um ear. Soon fellow come and ask him if he find out what going to happen. Me say glad, if plenty gold dust. Den dis fellow he tell Johnnie dat de Ashanti lie in de bush along close to de coast, ready to jump on de white man. Ask me to let um know when time come for de rush. Dat all I know. Johnnie take de dust and perhaps get more later."

He looked at the two sprawling on the roof of the cabin with a cunning smile, in which they joined. For, after all, though it was not precisely honest, this action of the stoker's, yet all was fair in love and war, and if one of the agents of the enemy came to one of the

servants of the white men asking for information and offering money, was it not in the nature of such a man as Johnnie to keep his information to himself, giving tit-bits of news which were of no importance, while he abstracted information as to the enemy's position, and a reward for himself?

"And that is all, Johnnie?" demanded Dick.

"All same as me tell yo. Noding more."

"Then you can get back to the engine. Now, Jack," went on Dick, "supposing it were true that the Ashantis were here, within a few miles of Elmina, and imagined themselves hidden from the English. Wouldn't it be an opportunity to take them by surprise and start the campaign favourably? There are not many troops at the Coast, I know, but there are marines and bluejackets aboard, and they should be sufficient."

"And they could be concentrated here rapidly. Yes; it would be a golden opportunity, and I see your meaning. Then you will put in at Elmina?"

"When it is dark," said Dick. "Then we shall not be seen, perhaps. That is why I delayed our departure. We are far enough along the coast now, and I propose that we steam out a little and lay to."

The proposal was carried out at once, for they judged that they were now some two hours' steaming from Elmina, and the day was still young. Therefore, it was as well to keep as far out as possible. Accordingly, the bows of the launch shot out over the oily sea, which was heaving continuously as it does along this long unbroken African coast, and very soon she lay to, a couple of miles or more from the beach.

"We'll have the lines out and do a little fishing,"

sang out Dick. "Any one who likes may sleep, save the man on guard. Johnnie, you'll need to bank the fires, for we shall want steam later."

A canvas awning had been rigged over the deck of the launch, for the heat would otherwise have been almost unbearable. And beneath this the two young officers and their crew stretched themselves at their ease, while each dropped a line overboard, for they had been careful to bring these in case their provisions should run short.

Some four hours later, just as the day began to draw in, they pulled up their lines and headed for Elmina. It was dark when they arrived off the fort, and they steamed into the river at once, passing beneath the bridge erected by the Dutch. Not a sound was heard aboard. The engines were working dead slow, while a screen of sacks surrounded the funnel, hiding any sparks which might have betrayed the presence of the launch. In the bows stood two of the bluejackets, with long poles in their hands, and presently, as the launch passed beyond the town into the river, they stretched these ahead as far as possible, letting the tips trail in the water.

"Take her along dead slow," whispered Dick in Johnnie's ear. "There are plenty of sand and mud banks, and we don't want to get stranded. Ah! that must be one."

Without the slightest warning, the launch came sweetly to a stop, burying her nose in a bank of mud which cropped up in the middle of the river. Even the men who held the poles had not been able to detect the obstruction in time, for their rods simply pierced the

soft material. And now, when they attempted to push the launch off, the same thing happened.

"All walk aft," said Dick. "Now, Johnnie, reverse the engines, and give her more steam. When I whistle let every man give a jump into the air."

His orders were given in the lowest tones, and were carried out without confusion, for the British sailor hates fuss and flurry, and can be relied on to act well and discreetly in an emergency. All gathered aft, and as Dick whistled they jumped into the air, shaking the launch as they came to the deck again. But still she clung to her cradle of mud.

"Then some of us must get overboard. What is the depth?" asked Dick.

In the silence he could hear the two bluejackets grope for their poles, and plunge them into the water. Then one of them came to his side.

"About two feet of water, and three of mud," he said. "If we was to go over the side, we couldn't swim, and the mud would hold us. What about putting something at the end of the poles, sir? Something that wouldn't sink so easily. How'd a couple of kegs do?"

Dick thought for a moment. Then he went to the tiny cabin, and unmasking a lamp, peered closely at the stores. Thanks to the generosity of those in charge of the commissariat, a liberal supply of provisions of a mixed character had been handed over to the expedition, and amongst these stores were some kegs of biscuits. Our hero gave vent to a whistle.

"Bring the two poles down here," he said, as a head was thrust into the cabin. "And let all stand round,

so as to hide the light should it show. Now, my lad, rip off the top of this keg."

One of the sailors had his cutlass out in a moment, and soon contrived to get the lids off two of the kegs, and the contents were poured into an empty provision box.

"Now, how are we to make them fast?" asked Dick. "You ought to know better than I."

He looked at the sailors and waited their reply, while they stared at the kegs, uncertain how to act, for it is no easy matter to attach an article of this kind to the end of a pole.

"With a bit of rope and a good fire I'd do it in half an hour," said one of the men at length. "Yer see, by rights, sir, we ought to have a step at the bottom of the keg, and lash the end of a pole down on to it. But yer can't do that 'cause a step needs hammerin', and that 'ud warn the enemy if he's hereabouts. But we've a fire, and a stoking bar, and that 'ud make a fine drill. With a hole through the centre of the lid and the bottom, we could push the pole through, and take a turn of the rope round above and below the keg. That would keep all in place and ship-shape."

"Then we'll get to the engine," said Dick, promptly. "Bring the kegs and poles while I douse the light. Now, you men," he went on, as he came out on the deck, "stand round the engine well while we finish the job. Johnnie, get that bar heated."

Some twenty minutes later the four holes had been drilled, and the poles pushed through, and secured with rope. Then the two sailors took their station on the bows, while the remainder went aft. The propeller

was reversed at full speed, while the kegs were placed against the mud bank, and the men holding the poles pushed with all their strength. Dick gave a low whistle, the men jumped, and this time with as gentle a motion as when she grounded, the launch left the bank and floated in the open water. Two hours later the boat was brought to a rest some miles up the river, and was pulled beneath an overhanging tree, where she lay till morning dawned.

"We have a fine place from which to keep watch, and we'll see whether we cannot make a catch," said Dick, as he and Jack Emmett sat down to breakfast. "How do you like the work, Jack?"

"It's fine," was the answer. "This is what I have been waiting for. And the best part of it all is that we are our own masters, and can therefore enjoy all the more fun. Supposing an army came along, as happened in your case?"

"We should lie hidden; if they found us we should fight. No more running away for me, particularly when I have a crew like this. Hullo! what's the report?"

One of the sailors had ascended the branches of the tree, from which post he could keep a watch on the river, and at this moment he whistled. Then they saw him come swarming down to drop from a height of fully fifteen feet on to the deck of the launch. He alighted as easily as a cat and came aft to his commander.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, as he saluted, "but there's a boat full of niggers a-coming down-stream, and they're armed."

Dick was up in a moment, and taking care to move with the utmost caution he pushed the leaves aside and looked out. The report was accurate, for coming down-stream was a large native boat, with some ten men aboard, on whose shoulders muskets were slung. A glance showed him that some at least were Ashantis, while the others he was not sure about.

"They must be captured," he said with decision. "We will wait till they are quite close, and will rush out at them. If they fire, four of you give them a volley. That will be sufficient, for we want to make a capture."

It was an exciting moment for the men of the expedition. Not that they had anything to fear from the men aboard the native boat. But they were now well above Elmina, and who could say whether the enemy were not all round them? In any case they must be near at hand, so that the attack might very well be followed by a general onslaught on the part of the Ashantis.

Dick busied himself with telling off the men to their stations, while he bade Jack Emmett take the tiller and steer the launch. Presently the native boat drew opposite their hiding-place, and at once the boughs were parted and the launch shot out into the river. There was a shout from the enemy, and half a dozen dropped their paddles and opened a hot fire, their slugs whistling over the launch.

"That proves that they are enemies," said Dick, in tones of satisfaction. "Give them a volley, my lads."

It was high time to return the fire, for as he spoke another burst of flame had come from the boat, and

three of the sailors were struck by the slugs. Not that that made much difference, for the hardy fellows did little more than grunt. There was a quick answering flash, and instantly four of the natives threw up their arms and toppled overboard.

"Put us at her hard!" shouted Dick, waving to Jack. "Now swing her round and bring us alongside. Keep under cover if you can, my lads, and give them a volley over their heads."

The whole manœuvre scarcely took five minutes. In less time than it takes to tell, the launch had swung out into the stream, had headed for the enemy, and finally had run alongside, a second volley from the rifles of the seamen ripping the air over the heads of the natives. And that was sufficient. Within a second they had thrown down their arms and had grovelled on the floor of the boat.

"Get them all aboard here and lash their arms and legs," sang out Dick. "That's the way. Smartly does it. Now dash a hole in their boat and let her sink. Turn the launch's head to the sea, Jack, and let us be going. Ah, there come the bullets."

There could be no doubt that there were more enemies at hand, and that the firing had attracted their attention, for hardly had three of the bluejackets tumbled aboard the native craft, while their comrades held the two boats together, when a gun bellowed from the low-lying forest on the opposite shore, and a bullet crashed into the stern of the launch.

"Jest look lively, me lad, will yer?" sang out one of the salts, as he gripped the shoulder of one of the grovelling enemy. "That's the sort. Yer don't want

to look at me as if I was about to eat yer, but jest hop aboard the launch."

He used the utmost politeness, while his grip closed about the native like a vise, and with such force that the wretch gave vent to a cry of terror. Then he was lifted bodily aboard the launch, where in spite of the slugs and bullets which were now falling about her, he and his companions were carefully and scientifically secured, Jack Tar not deigning to hasten because the enemy happened to be near at hand. Then one of the salts borrowed the stoking shovel from Johnnie, and in less than a minute the native boat had disappeared beneath the water. Meanwhile the bush on one side of the river echoed to the shouts of the enemy, and the fire which had at first been spasmodic, now became furious, till the surface of the river was lashed with bullets and slugs.

"Lie down, men, and return their fire," sang out Dick. "Jack, sink into that well, and steer us to the far side. I fancy we shall be out of range there, and I have seen none of the enemy. We will make for the sea now, for we have got all that we want; at least, we have obtained nearly all. The rest I shall hope to have soon. That's the way, my lads, pepper them well."

He took a rifle and lay down beside the men, firing at the flashes which spurted from the bush. And thanks to their superior weapons, and the skill of the sailors, the shots of the enemy gradually subsided, bursting out here and there afresh as they were silenced in one particular spot. Then Dick whistled to his men to cease fire.

"We do not wish to kill more of them," he said,

"and they cannot hurt us now. Let each of you stand beside one of the prisoners, and if you can impress him with your fierceness without really harming him, all the better."

There was a knowing grin on the faces of the men as they went to carry out their leader's commands; for they were beginning to grasp his meaning. And Dick, had he not been so serious, could have roared with laughter at the grimaces of the sailors, for they carried out his wishes to the letter till the captives writhed with terror. Meanwhile the launch, ignoring the continued fire of the enemy, kept to the far side of the river and steamed down to Elmina. Soon she passed beneath the bridge, breasted the breakers, and was at sea again, a few gashes on her planks, and a handkerchief or two about the arms of the sailors alone showing that she had been in action; those, and the captives lying upon her deck.

"Now, Jack, we will suppose that you can speak and understand the Ashanti tongue as well as I can," said Dick, coolly, as he came aft to the well and sat down beside his friend. "We are about to interrogate the prisoners, and you will pass sentence upon them. At least, I shall say that you are here for that purpose, and you must act the part by looking very severe. We will have them up one by one, and abstract all their information. Two of the bluejackets can stand guard over each prisoner as he is brought, while the others will be kept out of hearing in the bows. Now, recollect, to get information, we must terrorize these men. I don't like to do so, but natives understand no other means of persuasion. If you offer gold they will lie

and cheat you. Now, bring up the first of the prisoners."

It was an informal trial which was held at the stern of the launch and would have caused the laughter of any other group of men. But Dick and his command were bent on obtaining information, and if they could prove the proximity of the Ashantis, they would be doing an incalculable benefit to the commander of the British forces, for thereby he might be enabled to make a surprise attack, and gain a victory, a matter of great importance at this stage of the proceedings. And so, escorted by two of the bluejackets, with their rifles loaded, one of the captives was brought aft and halted just in front of our hero. He was a sturdy fellow, and now that two hours had passed since his capture his fears were beginning to subside. He looked closely at the white officers whom he confronted, noted their youth and at once gained further confidence. His head went up, he put on a defiant look and would have squatted there on the deck had it not been for the sailors.

"None of yer larks, me son," said one of them, giving the man a hitch which shot him to his feet. "Stand steady where you're put, or——"

There was a menace in the sailor's looks, and the rifle and cutlass with which he was armed supported the threat. The native stood upright, looking perhaps a little disconcerted.

"Tell me how long you have been near Elmina, and how many of your comrades are there?" asked Dick, in the Ashanti tongue.

Astonishment was written on the man's face, and

Dick noticed an expression of dismay. But it disappeared at once and the answer came glibly.

"I have been there a week. My comrades, all that remain, lie here on this deck. We were bringing our goods to Elmina."

"That is a lie," said Dick quietly, watching the man closely as he spoke. "You are an Ashanti. That I know for certain. Your comrades fired at us from the shore, and you were not carrying goods. Guns and swords formed your only cargo. Now, listen. You have news to give, and I require it. If you give it, you will be unharmed; if you lie, you will be killed. I will count my fingers over four times, and if at the end you have not spoken the truth you will be shot. That is the decision of my friend who sits beside me."

At once he began to count, while the native watched him, at first with looks of incredulity, and then with an expression of concern. Meanwhile there was tense silence amongst the group, save for the muttered words coming from Dick. He was nearing the end of his count, and as if to emphasize the fact, and at a nod from our hero, one of the sailors pulled back the lock of his rifle with a click. It was an ugly and an ominous sound, and in an instant it had the desired effect.

"I will speak, white chief," said the prisoner, hastily. "It is true that my comrades are up the river. How many I do not know, but there is an army. We have been there for weeks, and are starving. There is nothing more to tell."

Dick nodded curtly. "Take him into the cabin and see that he does not communicate with the others," he said. "Now, let us have another prisoner."

One by one the Ashanti prisoners were brought to the stern of the launch and interrogated, and the story told by all was precisely the same. The Ashantis were in force in the jungle lying within a few miles of Elmina and between that part and the river Pra. They had fraternized with the Elminas and other natives, nominally under our protection, and for the most part they were almost starving. They were awaiting the moment when they might attack the white men. There could be no doubt about the truth of their tale, for they had each said the same, and had had no time to concoct a story.

"We shall be welcome home again," said Dick, with a smile, as he rose from the well. "It is true that we have not yet gained information of the country beyond the Prahsu, but then there is plenty of time, for the troops who are to come out will not be here for some six weeks, and there are insufficient here now to make the march to Kumasi. But there may be enough men for this expedition to Elmina. That will, of course, rest with Sir Garnet, but they say he is a dashing leader, and I fancy he will strike a blow. Full steam, Johnnie. The sooner we are back the better."

Five hours later our hero stood hat in hand in the office at Government House, facing the chief of Sir Garnet's staff.

"This is very important news which you bring," said the officer, seriously. "Have you told any one what you have learned?"

He looked anxiously at Dick and waited for his reply, giving expression to an exclamation of relief when he heard the answer.

"Then you and Mr. Emmett are the only two who know. Your native stoker has suspicions, but you say that he is trustworthy. I fancy we may be able to hoodwink these natives."

An hour later, when Dick retired to Mr. Pepson's house, the details of an expedition had been roughly drafted, and on the following morning orders were published. But those in authority knew that they had cunning foes to deal with, and that spies abounded even in Cape Coast Castle. And so when those who were to take part in the attack embarked, it was with the belief that they were to sail to a different part of the country altogether, and that Elmina and its neighbourhood was not even under consideration. It was with a light heart that Dick steamed back to Elmina, and took his station near the fort, prepared to operate with the expedition and attack the enemy.

"You will listen for our bugle calls, and direct your fire accordingly," the Chief of the Staff had warned him. "Otherwise we may be firing into one another. Keep the men well in hand, for the bush will be dense. But there, I am forgetting that you have had experience already. Hold our right flank and punish them severely."

Early on the following morning, when the marines and bluejackets had disembarked at Elmina, and the native troops had joined them on the beach, Dick and his men steamed up the river, and having gained a point some miles higher up, stood in to the bank and landed, leaving two men in charge of the launch.

"Lie off at anchor, and keep a sharp watch," he commanded. "Now, my lads, we will hunt in couples,

and remember to use your whistles, for it is easy to get lost here. Follow me and be sure you go warily."

They turned their backs on the water, and plunged into the bush, their eyes endeavouring to pierce the dense undergrowth, while their ears were forever alert to detect the proximity of the enemy.

CHAPTER XV

Bluejackets, Charge!

"HALT!" Dick Stapleton lifted his hand above his head, and crouched low in the jungle, while the sailors who followed him in single file, slashing a path through the dense undergrowth, copied his example. "H-h-hush! Did you hear? There it is again!"

Dick whispered in Jack Emmett's ear, and Jack, to whom bush work was a novelty, stared back at his friend in amazement. For he had seen nothing, and there had been no sound to arouse his suspicion. Indeed, all about the little party looked quiet and peaceful. Overhead towered enormous cotton trees, running to the height of two hundred and fifty feet, while beneath their overspreading branches were yams and plantain trees, huge ferns and every variety of forest growth, many of these latter being giants in themselves, but dwarfed by the ponderous girth and height of the cotton trees. At the feet of these wonders of the African forest clustered vines and trailing creepers. Orchids and lovely lichens clung to the boughs, while huge masses of buff, violet, pink and brilliant yellow

convolvuli hung suspended in festoons, brightening the gloom which pervaded this underworld of the jungle. Not a native could be seen. Indeed, the bush was so dense that Dick and his party could not see beyond a few feet, and every yard they advanced had to be won by diligent cutting with sword or cutlass. Yet our hero was suspicious.

"There, listen!" he said again, in a low whisper. "Listen to the birds."

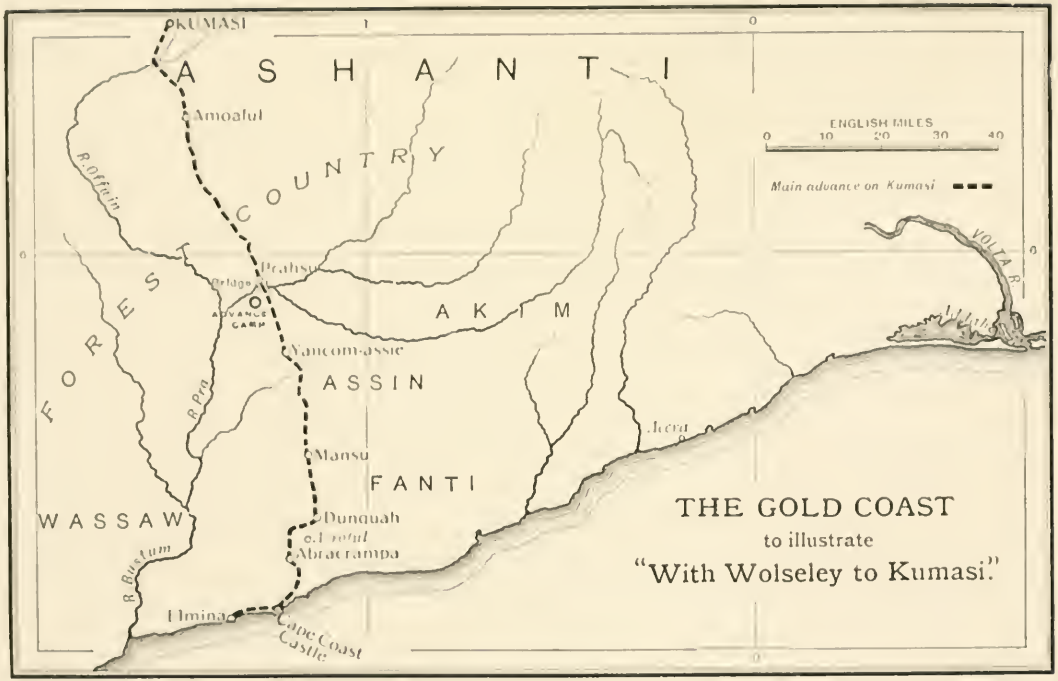
"I hear them. But what of that? There are heaps in these woods, no doubt," was Jack's reply. "That does not say that the enemy are near. Wait, though. That was a cheer. Our men must be somewhere in the neighbourhood."

At that moment a distant cheer had come to their ears through the barrier of boughs, and at the sound both sat up suddenly and listened. Then Dick began to crawl forward again.

"We can go on," he said quietly. "The calls of the birds were not real, of that I feel sure. They were made by the enemy, purposely to let each man know that he was near his fellows. It's a good idea. Halt again!"

This time he beckoned the bluejackets to come close up to him, and for a little while they were clustered together at the foot of a cotton tree.

"We are getting near the enemy," said Dick, "and if we are rushed it will be very easy to get separated. We will keep in couples, and no man is to be more than three or four feet from his comrade. Once we are in touch with the enemy we will whistle, so as to tell each other where we are. Then there will be no


KUMASI
A S H A N T I
Amoaful
COUNTRY
R. Offin
Prahsu
Bridge
ADVANCE CAMP
AKIM
FOREST
Yancom-assie
ASSIN
R. Pra
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FANTI
WASSAW
Dunquah
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R. Bussum
Elmina
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ENGLISH MILES
0 10 20 30 40
Main advance on Kumasi
THE GOLD COAST
to illustrate
"With Wolseley to Kumasi."

getting lost, and we shall not run the danger of firing at one another. Remember, before pulling a trigger, give a whistle and wait a moment."

Once more he turned his face to the interior of the jungle and crept on, and presently the call of birds was again heard. Then he redoubled his caution, cutting creepers from his path as silently as possible, and removing all broken twigs from the ground. Half an hour later he and his men came to a sudden halt, for the darkness which had surrounded them up to this suddenly lightened, while as if to increase their difficulties there came the sound of more cheers, the answering yell of hundreds of natives, and then a succession of sharp explosions which shook the leaves. A minute later a volley of slugs screeched overhead, stripping the boughs, and covering the little party with the debris.

"Forward!" shouted Dick, "and let the men come up on either side of me. We will get to this clearing and turn the enemy out."

There was no time to be lost, for it was now evident that the approach of his party had been heard by the enemy, while the sudden lifting of the gloom showed that there was a clear space in the forest some little way ahead, and from this no doubt the enemy were firing. Dick lost no time therefore in pushing forward. Bent double he ran between the creepers, jumping over fallen boughs, and slashing at every obstruction which threatened to arrest his progress. Very soon he came to the edge of the forest. Meanwhile the sailors were not behindhand. They gave vent to a cheer, just to show their spirit, and then, spreading

by couples to either side, they scrambled forward, wriggling their way through the bush.

"Lie flat!" shouted Dick, as they got into position, and a second volley of slugs flew overhead. "Now, you can see where they are. Pick them off, my lads. Fire about a foot below the flashes and about the same or a little less to the right. That should get them."

At his order the men threw themselves on their faces, and wriggling forward a few inches till they could obtain a clear glimpse of the open space ahead, opened a heavy and well-directed fire at the flashes and puffs of smoke which burst from a hundred points on the opposite side of the clearing. There the jungle again commenced, though it was not so dense, and many paths could be seen cutting their way through it. Beyond, some distance away, the glare of a big fire could be detected, while the smoke hung over the summit of the forest trees.

"Our men at work," Dick shouted to his companion, "and these fellows who are firing at us are between us and our friends. We must try to drive them away and effect a junction."

But if that was his object, it was not so easy to accomplish, for the enemy were in full force on the far side of the narrow clearing, and had he and his party but known it, the path taken by the British troops led rather far to the left of the river, while so deceptive was the forest that the glare and the smoke were actually much more distant than they appeared. Sir Garnet had with him a few bluejackets, with a seven-pounder gun and a rocket trough, twenty Royal Marine Artillery, 129 Royal Marines, 205 of the West India

Regiment, 126 Houssas, a force enlisted in Central Africa, a few natives and many bearers enlisted on the coast. It was this force which Dick and his comrades heard. They had come upon the village of Essaman, and finding it vacant had set it on fire, exploding some kegs of powder which the enemy had left, and finding a number of muskets and war-drums, all evidence of the truth of the report which had been brought by our hero to headquarters. Indeed, there was little doubt that the enemy were in force in the neighbourhood, though so far none on our side had seen a single man. All that Dick could perceive was the flash of guns, and the falling of numerous leaves and twigs cut down by the slugs which hailed overhead. Suddenly another sound attracted his attention, and his expression changed to one of concern.

"Our fellows are going still farther away, and the enemy are closing in on us," he said hastily. "There is a man, and, look, others are appearing. They are going to try a rush. We will warn the men. Listen, my lads," he shouted, "the Ashantis look as if they would try a charge, and we must stop it. If they reach this side of the clearing they will creep into the jungle and shoot us down easily. Keep on firing till I shout, then charge them as they come."

Kneeling behind a tree he kept a keen watch upon the opposite side, and now that the enemy were exposing themselves, his bullets seldom failed to tell. As for the Jack Tars, they seemed to enjoy the work, for they lay on their faces, calmly ignoring the hail of slugs overhead, and returned the fire of the enemy with wonderful steadiness. At Dick's words, too, each eased

his cutlass in its sheath, and just glanced ahead to make sure that there was nothing to keep him from reaching the open. Nor was it long before the necessity for action on their part was called for. The firing from the opposite side became even fiercer, and by now Dick and the majority of his men had been hit; though, thanks to the wide interval existing between the combatants, few of the missiles penetrated. Then there came the beat of a war-drum, a dull, reverberating sound which seemed to echo through the forest, while Dick caught fleeting glimpses of a group of the enemy, passing amidst the trees, and exhorting their comrades.

"Get ready, my lads," he sang out, "and don't forget, give them a couple of volleys and more as they run. When I shout, form up outside and charge. Jack, just watch those beggars and when they cross one of the paths let us fire together."

They lay behind two plantain trees which happened to be close together, and followed the movements of the group of Ashanti officers whom they had seen on the opposite side of the clearing. Within a few seconds they saw them emerge into one of the numerous roads cut through the forest. Both fired together, and gave a shout as they saw one of the enemy, a big man, gaudily dressed and feathered, fall to the ground. A moment later they were throwing cartridges into their rifles as rapidly as was possible, and were emptying their weapons at a speed which showed what need there was for action. For hardly had the tall leader on the far side given a shriek and fallen, when the deep boom of the war-drum became deafening, as if the man who

wielded the stick were beating out his indignation and hatred. Shouts of fury filled the air, and as if the drum were the signal, some two hundred of the dusky enemy started from the trees and commenced to rush across the clearing. Very fierce and forbidding they looked as they came, for they had discarded their muskets, or had slung them behind their shoulders, and now they were armed with Ashanti swords, or with formidable-looking knives.

"Steady, men!" shouted Dick, at once. "We have plenty of time to knock a few over. Fire as fast as you can and wait for the signal."

The forest resounded to the crack of the rifles, and to the shouts of the natives. Not a sound came from the bluejackets save that given out from their weapons. They maintained a grim silence, and stretched there on their faces, kept up a withering fire, directing their shots with marvellous coolness. But there was a stern, ugly glint in their eyes, and the hands that wielded the rifles gripped very tightly. Then Dick gave a shout, and in a moment all were on their feet.

"Drop your rifles," he commanded. "Now line up. My men, we are not to be frightened by a lot of bellowing natives."

"Afraid. Not us!" came the reply from one of the salts. "Jest fancy hooking it because of these fellers. We'll get aboard and sink 'em, boys."

There was a roar as the men heard the words, while the swish of cutlasses being drawn from their scabbards could be heard. Then Dick gave another shout, and placing himself beside Jack Emmett at the head of the little party he started forward, his teeth clenched,

and his mind made up to beat back this attack and conquer.

"Charge!" he bellowed. "Charge into the middle of them."

There was now no longer need for silence, and the cheer which the men gave showed that their spirit was not lacking. Closely following their young leaders they raced forward in a compact body, heading for the very centre of the enemy. And it was clear at once that their sudden appearance and their warlike intentions gave food for thought to the enemy. The mad rush of the Ashantis came to a sudden end, the mass halting to stare at these few enemies. A few turned tail immediately and fled, while some of the natives hung in the background, uncertain how to act. Then one of their number gave a shout and they came on again, but this time with less determination. A few seconds later the combatants met, the sailors throwing themselves upon the Ashantis with deafening cheers, cutting and slashing at them fiercely, while one of them, happening to miss his aim, and to strike the ground with his weapon, whereby it was jerked from his hand, took to his fists in true nautical style, and struck right and left amongst the enemy. Still, it was a critical moment for Dick and his party, and only their dash and bravery saved them. The contest hung in the balance for a minute or more, while the natives stabbed desperately at the sailors, some of them doubling up and attempting to dash in below the cutlass. But the result was always the same. There was a thud, and the weapon fell with unerring aim, stretching the man on the ground. Or if that was not the

case, Jack's knee would rise of a sudden, and the native would receive a blow on the head which stunned him instantly. Amidst all the clamour came the sharp crack of the revolvers held by the two young leaders.

"Forward!" shouted Dick. "Give a cheer, and drive them back."

Grandly did the men support him. Though they had been fighting their hardest before, striving to arrest the rush of the enemy, now they charged into their broken ranks, belabouring them with their cutlasses, striking out with their fists, and making up for their smallness in numbers by sheer bravery and dash. And in a minute they had gained their object. Many of the enemy had already fallen, and now, of a sudden, the remainder turned tail and fled, leaving the British masters of the situation.

"Back for the rifles, some of you," cried Dick. "The remainder run forward and occupy the enemy's position. Quick, or they will bowl us over with their slugs."

The warning came only just in time, for those of the enemy who had fled at the first sight of the sailors had taken cover on the fringe of the forest, in the position which they had occupied a few minutes before; and no sooner had their comrades turned and commenced to retreat than these men opened a scattered fire, regardless of the risk they ran of hitting their friends. But Dick and his men never paused. While four of them ran back to gather the rifles, the remainder followed close on the heels of the enemy, and hardly had the firing opened, and the war-drum commenced

its boom again, when they were at the edge of the forest and close upon the Ashantis who lurked there. For some two minutes there was another hand-to-hand contest, for these men were caught in their lairs, and, hindered from gaining one of the numerous paths by the denseness of the forest, were forced to turn and fight. However, the sailors made short work of them, and very soon were lying amidst the trees again, breathing heavily after their exertions.

Meanwhile the troops in other quarters had been engaged with the enemy, and had driven them before them. No sooner had Essaman been given to the flames than the whole line advanced over more or less open country. On our left was a grassy plateau, with a thick forest about three hundred yards away, while directly in front the ground fell and was covered with bush growing breast high. Towards this the Houssas and West Indian regiment advanced, the men shouting and filling the air with discordant yells, while they blazed away at the bush, at the sky, anywhere in fact, and without any definite object. They were entirely out of hand, as some native troops are apt to get, and at this moment they were as dangerous to their own side as to the enemy. However, by dint of much energy and shouting the officers managed to get them in hand again and enforce some fire discipline. Then, as they advanced through the bush, the bluejackets and the Marine Artillery took the wood on the left in hand, and the steel gun opened upon the lurking enemy. The rockets were also brought to bear upon them, and very soon the place was clear, a few wounded Ashantis being discovered as we advanced. But still

our men were far from Dick and his little force, and he had yet much difficulty to contend with.

"First, let us see to the wounded," he said, as they lay breathing heavily in the forest. "Then we will follow hard upon the tracks of the enemy, in the hope of joining our comrades. Now, who is badly hit?"

There was no response from the tars, though he looked at each one in turn.

"Then who is hit at all?" he asked.

"One here, sir," was the reply from one of the lusty fellows. "One of those rascals struck me in the leg with his knife. He's back there, sir, for it hurt and I give 'im what for right away. It's a bit of a scratch and the surgeon will fix it up when we get back. Plenty of time, sir."

"And I've a slug somewheres about me shoulder," sang out another; three more acknowledging the same sort of wound, and all making light of it.

"Then we are lucky, my lads," said Dick, gaily. "A slug is nothing. I have one somewhere about my ribs, and it gave me quite a nasty knock. But I am sure it has not penetrated. Then no one needs to be carried, and none are bleeding to death. Good! We will advance. Now, we will go by one of these paths, and we will keep a careful watch in front and rear as well as to either side. Jack, take the advance, please. I will go to the right, for I am more used to the forests. Keep a bright look-out, as these fellows are fond of an ambush."

Once more they sprang to their feet and went into the forest, but on this occasion they were able to follow a native path. Still, their progress was slow, for the

men who scrambled through the underwood, seeking for the enemy, could, naturally, not get along as rapidly as those in the open. At length, however, the party emerged from the forest, and came upon the breast-high bush which the Houssas and West Indians were attacking, and from the sounds proceeding from it made sure that the enemy were then rapidly retreating.

"Then we will help them," said Dick. "Can you men run a little farther?"

There was an emphatic nod from all as he asked the question.

"Then we will make for the edge higher up and see what we can do. Double!"

A few minutes later the firing taking place on their left warned them that they were now level with the lurking enemy, and at once they came to a halt.

"Take post in the trees on this side," came the order. "Then you will be able to see down into the bush and clear it. Smartly, lads, for there will be people watching us."

He could not have set the sailors a more enjoyable task. They slung their rifles, and at once set to work to swarm into the trees which grew so plentifully close at hand. Then one gave a lusty shout.

"There they are, sir," he cried, "and I can see our own troops."

"Then take care that they don't see you, or you may be shot by mistake. Now, make every bullet tell."

Perched in their trees the party could look down upon the bush, for it happened that they had halted at a spot which was elevated well above the surrounding country. To this the height to which they had climbed

gave them added advantage, so much so that they could distinguish the figures of the enemy crawling and running amidst the creepers and bracken. Every now and again the Ashantis would halt and fire, running on at once, bent double, and busily engaged in putting another charge in their guns. And all the while the Houssas and West Indians, who were advancing into the bush, exposing themselves to this fire, could not see a single enemy, and were suffering severely in consequence. However, Dick and his bluejackets soon made a difference to their comfort. Their rifle shots broke the silence in that spot, and brought an answering shower of slugs from the enemy. Then, so telling was their fire, that the Ashantis broke and fled to the forest.

"Bravo! Well done! Well done, indeed, bluejackets! Who is your officer, please?"

An officer of some importance, who had been advancing with a small escort along the side of the bush, suddenly rode up, mounted on a mule, and halted beneath the trees occupied by the sailors. Dick glanced down and recognized him as one of Sir Garnet's staff, an officer of great distinction. He scrambled to the ground, rifle in hand, and advancing took off his cap.

"Dick Stapleton, sir," he said. "Sir Garnet put me in command of a small party, with orders to operate as well as I was able on the right flank. We heard the firing and answered."

"Mr. Stapleton. Yes; I know all about you," was the reply, as the officer returned the salute. "I congratulate you on the fruits of your discovery. You

have given us an excellent chance of punishing the enemy. Whose idea was it to take to the trees?"

"Mine, sir," admitted Dick. "I am in command."

"Exactly so, my lad, and it was a smart movement. It is not every commander who would have thought of it. May I ask if you have been operating in the clearing on our right? I have just passed through it."

Dick again admitted the fact, and described in a few words what had happened.

"Not all quite so simple as you imagine, or as you have stated," was the hearty answer. "You give all the credit to your men. Quite right, sir. Every good officer who has good men to command does that. It is only right and fair. Allow me to say that something is also due to the one in command, upon whom all the responsibility of every movement depends. Do you know the result of that little action? No. Then I will tell you. The enemy were practising a favourite manœuvre: they were attempting to close in on our flanks. On the left the sailors and marines put a stop to the movement, while here on the right they would have succeeded had it not been for you. Gallantly done, men; a very fine piece of work. You accounted for thirty-seven of the enemy, and beat back their flank attack. I shall take good care to mention the matter at headquarters. Now we will advance along this flank, and see if we cannot induce some of the enemy to halt and give us a fight."

Dick and his men were delighted and glowing with pride. They had worked hard, and fought hard, too, all knew that. But, though they were aware that the force opposed to them was a large one, they did not

imagine that *such* an important movement had been in progress, and that they had been the means of putting a summary stop to it. It was therefore with light hearts and spirits raised to the highest point that they continued the advance. Then as the troops swept the enemy before them, and turned along the beach, where they encountered another of the hostile villages and burned it, Dick and his party received an order to halt, and the same officer addressed them.

"We shall be moving well away from the river now," he said, "and it will hardly be safe for you to advance with us. Return to your launch now, for otherwise you might have to fight every inch of the way."

Turning about the party retraced their steps past the bush and into the forest. Then they entered the clearing, and came upon the results of their impetuous charge. It was not pleasant work to look upon, and they hurried away, and very soon were at the river. A loud halloo brought the launch in close to the bank and all embarked, those who had been left aboard muttering deeply and bitterly against the cruel fate which had caused them to miss such an opportunity and such distinction.

Meanwhile our troops had advanced still farther parallel to the beach, and had fired two other villages. They came upon numerous signs that the Ashantis had been there in force, and in one spot sure evidence of the ferocity of these people. For they discovered the body of an unhappy Fanti captive, suspended feet in air, and with the head slashed from the trunk. It was a horrible sight, and caused many of the Ashantis to

lose their lives, for our men were roused to fury, and the musketry fire was so searching, and the rockets so well directed, that numbers of the enemy fell. Finally, fully satisfied with their day's work against the enemy, the troops returned to their quarters, Sir Garnet steaming back to Cape Coast Castle.

Late that night an officer came to Mr. Pepson's in search of Dick Stapleton. For the report of his conduct had come to headquarters, and he was required to be thanked for his fine services.

"A dashing young fellow, and a valuable officer," said the Chief of the Staff, with enthusiasm. "I am empowered to offer him a commission in the regular service. A gallant fellow, indeed!"

But there was no trace of our hero. Indeed, he and his men had not returned. No sooner had the battle ended, as far as they were concerned, than they steamed down the river and along the coast. When night fell they were lying within the mouth of the river leading to the Pra, and as the sun came up on the following morning he looked down upon the rakish little launch surging up the river at full steam, in search of more information and also of a little more adventure. Nor was it long before one of these came to them, for late on the following morning a shout came echoing down the river, while the eyes of all aboard the launch flew to an object moving swiftly towards them.

CHAPTER XVI

News from Ashanti

"A BOAT! a native boat!" shouted Jack, who was keenly alert. "And with only one occupant in it. Look how he's paddling!"

"For his life, I should say," chimed in Dick. "Ah, there goes a gun; and see where the bullet splashed. The man who fired must have been hidden in the forest. I don't think the poor beggar stands a chance, unless he steers right across to the far side of the river."

"And if he did, sir, he'd be had sure enough," sang out one of the sailors. "I can see a boat creeping along in the shadow. Shall we try a shot, sir?"

For a little while there was no answer. It was difficult to say whether this man—for there was undoubtedly only one in the flying craft—was an enemy or a friend. If he were an Ashanti, then he was certainly the former. But then were those who pursued him friendly natives, living under the nominal protection of the British, therefore opposed to the Ashantis?

"He's in trouble, of that there is no doubt," said Dick, suddenly, as the native boat, propelled by the frantic strokes of its single occupant and helped by the

current, swept down towards them. "And he has some scores of enemies pursuing him. What if he is carrying news to us? Perhaps he is coming down with important information. Get your rifles ready, and if that other boat pushes out into the river get her range and wait for the word. Ah, he's seen us. Did you see him wave his paddle?"

For a moment the unhappy wretch who was coming down the stream in such desperate haste lifted his paddle and waved it overhead with an eagerness there was no mistaking. Then he plunged it into the water again, and plied it for his life. That he was threatened with death if captured there could be little doubt, for the unseen foes who manned the far bank thrashed the water about him with their slugs, while the silence and peace of the river was disturbed by the loud boom of their muzzle-loaders, and by their excited shouts. In a moment Dick made up his mind to help the fugitive, whoever he might be, and at a word the sailors lay down and commenced to fire at the bushes from which came the puffs of smoke. Meanwhile Jack Emmett kept the launch steadily in mid-stream, Johnnie supplying her with a small amount of steam, which was sufficient to keep her under way and prevent her being swept back by the current. As for the men who had appeared, lurking in the shadows in their boat, a single shot sufficed to send them back round the bend of the river.

"Perhaps they have had a taste of our rifles before," thought Dick, as he watched the boat and saw the splash of the shot where it struck the water close beside them. "Anyway, they have retreated fast enough, and

I fancy the fire from the shore is dying down. Steady, men! I think we have done enough. Our fusillade has stopped their advance and that fellow in the boat is getting out of their range. Look at him!"

It was indeed a sight to behold, for if the fugitive had shown eagerness before, he now displayed the utmost delight and excitement. He shouted to the launch, and waved his paddle again. Then he turned, and noticing that the slugs which were still fired at him now fell far astern, he laughed, and standing up, shook a defiant fist. Then once more he threw himself on his knees, and dug his paddle into the stream, sending his light craft ahead till the water was churned into froth at her bows. A few minutes later he came level with the launch, when he threw himself down in the bottom of his boat, and lay there exhausted and out of breath with the struggle.

"Pull him aboard and let him lie under the awning," said Dick. "Make his boat fast, and then we'll push along up the river. Keep well under cover, for we may have some trouble. That's the way, Jack. Keep in the very centre, for it is so wide here that we need have little fear should they fire, while we can reach either bank with our weapons."

Obedient to a nod from his master, Johnnie opened the throttle a little, till the launch attained a good pac Meanwhile the sailors had rapidly transferred the fugitive from his boat to the deck of the steamer, and had made his craft fast right aft. Only then did Dick notice that the native was not an Ashanti, while a half-healed wound on one thigh, now bleeding afresh after his exertions, or perhaps because of a second injury,

showed that he had little cause to thank those from whom he fled. As for the latter, an occasional shot from the bank told that some were still there, though their slugs were quite harmless at that distance, and, indeed, failed to reach the launch. But even these soon ceased to trouble, particularly when the sailors directed their rifles at the flashes, and sent in a withering volley. Of the other boat nothing was seen, and in all probability she had long since been hidden.

"They must have rounded the bend and then dragged her into the forest," said Dick. "I think we might steam on another mile, and then talk to this fellow. He's not an Ashanti, Jack."

"And he's no friend of theirs, either," sang out Jack, from his post at the tiller. "He looks thin and ill-used, and may very well have been one of the wretched beggars you have told me about who are kept prisoners at Kumasi, till some uncle or grandmother of King Koffee's dies, when hundreds of captives are sacrificed."

"More than likely," was our hero's answer, for he had been in this part of the country long enough to have learned all that was known of the Ashantis and their ferocity. He knew that it was said that thousands were slain in cold blood every year in this horrible den called Kumasi, and that the death of a king's son necessitated the slaying of at least two thousand wretched girls, children and men, to satiate the hideous Moloch reigning over the fetish house at the capital. And no doubt this poor fellow was one. Dick nodded to him and smiled, and at the sign of friendship the man rose and crept towards him till he crouched at his feet.

Then he did a strange thing. He fumbled with his twitching fingers in the masses of his hair, and finally produced a discoloured piece of linen.

"For the white chief," he said; "I have risked my life to bring it to you. These Ashanti men would have killed me as I came, and if they had captured me——"

The very thought of what might have followed unnerved the man, who was still suffering from the effects of his desperate efforts to escape. His teeth shook while his limbs trembled. Then he seized our hero by the hand and clung to it as if his life now depended upon doing so.

"Who are you?" asked Dick, using the Ashanti tongue. "Where do you come from, and why have you been pursued?"

"Look at the letter, chief. See the figures there and I will talk. I am an Assim. I hate these cruel Ashantis."

The native watched with eager eyes as the strip of discoloured linen was unfolded, and started back as if in terror as the white youth suddenly rose from the roof of the deck cabin to his feet and glared at the strip. It was an important missive, evidently, for he grew red with excitement, and gave a prolonged whistle of astonishment. Then he called in loud tones to Jack to come to his side. There was a tone of profound astonishment and relief in his voice, and he waved the strip of linen above his head.

"News!" he shouted. "News at last! Look at the signature. Poor beggar! How he must be suffering!"

"Who? Who's the poor beggar? Is it one of the captives about whom there has been such a row? You

know whom I mean. The Europeans for whom King Koffee demanded a ransom."

"Yes; it is his latest prisoner," was Dick's answer. "Look here."

He spread out the tattered piece of dirty linen upon the roof of the cabin and showed it to his friend. It looked as though it might at one time have formed a portion of a white linen handkerchief, or perhaps it was a strip torn from a man's shirt. In any case it had been pressed into the service of the writer of the missive for lack of other and better material; and the ink with which the letters were scrawled was in all probability derived from the diluted juice of some berry growing in the forest. They straggled across the strip, some large and some very small, all more or less blotched and blurred, while many unmistakably pointed to the fact that a pointed twig or some such primitive implement had done service for a pen.

"From Meinheer Van Somering," said Dick, impressively. "Poor beggar! He is one of the owners of the mine, as I have already told you, and it was he who was attacked with Mr. Pepson on their way down to the coast. The agent whose place I took was killed at the first volley, while Meinheer capsized the boat. The last that Mr. Pepson saw of him was as he plunged into the river. We thought him drowned, and he is, or was, a captive. Listen, and I will read."

He spread the strip out once more, smoothing the many creases, and having again run his eye over the letters commenced to read.

" 'For the love of Gott, help me, mein friends. I have made the escape from these terrible Ashanti men.

I have come to the creek where was the mine, and, alas! there is no boat. All are gone. With me is one friend, a native, who make the escape also. He say he can find boat down the stream and make for the coast. He will try. Brave man! If he live, then he return with mein friend, and make the rescue. Mein word! how I wait for him. Christian Van Somering.'"

It was a pathetic missive, scrawled as it was on this dirty strip of linen, and Dick's eyes filled with tears at the thought of the miserable condition of Meinheer. His face assumed an expression of determination, and he swung round upon the native with a question. So sudden and unexpected was the movement, that the man cringed to the deck again, and placed his hands over his head as if to ward off a blow.

"Have no fear," said our hero, in the Ashanti tongue. "Tell me all about this matter; how you came to meet the white man, and how you made your escape. Where is he living now?"

It was pitiable to watch the relief depicted upon the face of the fugitive as he heard the words. He knelt upon the deck and looked about him as though he could hardly believe his ears. He might have been a culprit who expected discovery at any moment, and who suddenly found that suspicion had passed over his head and had settled upon some other individual. He sighed, stood up, and then began to answer.

"It is a long tale, but I can tell it shortly," he said. "I was in the village when the enemy came upon us, and with many others was taken prisoner. Here is the mark of the wound which I received as I endeav-

oured to escape. I was taken towards Kumasi, the place where slaves are killed in the house of execution, and I knew that death was before me. Like many another I longed to effect an escape, and it happened that I succeeded with the help of the white chief. Yes, chief, he was a prisoner also, being dragged towards Kumasi, and it was he who, as we lay side by side one night, bit through the lashings which secured my arms and legs. Then I set him free and we stole away to this place where the white chief had once been. None suspected that we were there, and we had hoped to find another white chief at the mine, and boats in which to make down the river. But there was no stockade. The place had been burned, and the boats were gone."

"How long ago is this?" demanded Dick. "When did you meet the white chief?"

The native counted the days off on his fingers and thought for a moment. Then he stretched out his hands and lifted his ten fingers into the air four times in succession.

"It is so many days, perhaps more," he said. "I cannot say. The days were so much alike. We lived in terror of our lives, for the enemy were on the river and about the mine. We hid in the forest, living on yams and plantains. Then the chief fell sick, and for a little while I thought he would die. But he recovered, and bade me go down the river with this scrap of linen. He lies there near the creek, chief."

"Yes, but that does not explain how you managed to make this journey," interposed our hero. "How did you obtain the boat?"

"I stole it. At night I crept through the forest close

to the water, till I came to the camp of the enemy. Then I searched and found a boat. After that I fled, and the chief knows what happened. He saved my life."

It was a simple tale of escape, and there was nothing wonderful about it. The incidents of it escaped the minds of the hearers at once, for their thoughts were turned to Meinheer Van Somering, lying there in the forest, struck down with the all-prevailing fever, no doubt.

"Of course we shall go up-stream and take him back to the coast," said Dick, promptly. "But first we must find out something about the enemy. It would never do to be caught in a trap. Tell me about the Ashantis," he went on, addressing the native. "Where are their camps?"

"There are two on the river," was the answer. "From the first I stole the boat, and the second, which is lower down, discovered me as the dawn came."

"Then they would certainly discover us," said Jack, when Dick had explained matters to him. "We should find ourselves in a regular hive, and that would not be very pleasant. Mind, Dick, I don't want to discourage this idea of rescue; still, we must think of the men. Could we run up in the launch without being seen and followed?"

A vigorous shake of Dick's head was the answer. "We should be discovered as sure as eggs. Then they would put a fleet of boats on the river and follow. Their guns would attract the attention of their comrades higher up, and, well—I couldn't expect such good fortune again as befell Johnnie and myself on a former

occasion. Frankly, to run the launch up under such circumstances would be madness."

There was silence for some minutes amongst the group gathered about the cabin, the throb of the miniature engine alone breaking the silence of the river. A difficult question had to be settled, and the longer the two young Englishmen stared at the strange missive written, or scratched rather, upon the dirty strip of linen, the greater did the difficulty become. It was clear to both that, however big the stake, however important the life to be rescued, they had no right to risk the safety of the whole of the launch's crew, and there would be risk if they went. More than that, the attempt to ascend, with the certain information that there were two camps on the banks of the river, would be madness, and deserving of the utmost censure.

"Ask him if he thinks we could rush through, and how far it is," suggested Jack, suddenly.

"It would mean death. There are thousands of the enemy," was the answer. "As to the place, it is not very far. I stole the boat last night and by dawn I reached this part. For some hours the stream carried me, for I would not risk the use of the paddle.

"Twenty miles at least," muttered Dick, staring out across the water.

"And too far to risk a rush. There is no moon to-night, Dick, and that would be against us, for if we steamed up, it would be at full speed, and we should come back at the same pace also. Well, for that we want light. There may be banks here and there. The risk of collision would be great. In short, I'm dead against it. Don't think I'm funking; I'm not. We

are here to gather information, and, of course, we would effect a rescue if possible. We are not authorized to act rashly, and endanger the whole expedition by making an attempt which is foredoomed to failure. In short, we are supposed to possess common sense and courage, and in the decision of this question it appears to me that it requires more courage to say, 'No, it can't be done; we must leave the poor beggar,' than it does to stoke our fires and steam up the river at full speed."

There was no doubt that Jack Emmett had placed the facts of the matter in a nutshell, and that it pained him to say what he had said. Dick knew him well enough now to be sure that his companion had sufficient dash and daring for this or any other expedition, and he knew well, too, that if he, the leader of this little party, gave the word, the movement would be commenced without a murmur, and every effort made to carry it through to a satisfactory conclusion. But had he the right to give such an order? Might he risk the lives of all for one, and that one not an Englishman? Could he leave him to his fate, knowing that he only lay some twenty miles away?

"Impossible! I would rather risk anything," he said aloud. "You are right, Jack," he exclaimed, turning to his friend. "I am not justified in asking the men to join in such a dash—hair-brained attempt it would be called. Besides, this expedition is sent here for a purpose, and that is to gather news of the utmost importance. That is our aim and object in coming here, and we must keep it prominently before us. There is just one saving clause."

"That is?" demanded Jack, breathlessly.

"That I have a subaltern, as I may call you. If I am shot, or fall ill, the launch need not return, as once before happened to us, on my account, I grieve to state. The launch would remain and carry out the work."

"Quite so. But I don't follow. I hope you won't be shot. If you are, then, of course, I shall command, and it will be a case of the fortune of war."

He might have been a Frenchman by his manner of shrugging his shoulders. His handsome, open face showed clearly that he disliked this conversation wherein the possible fate of his friend and commander was discussed.

"Certainly," came Dick's answer, given in the coolest tones. "As leader, I give orders. I find on going into this matter, that it would be unwise to risk the lives of the crew and ourselves in attempting a rescue. But, at the same time, I cannot leave an old friend to a ghastly fate."

"Then you will go?"

"Yes; I will go alone with this native. He came down the river at night, and what he has done I can do. I will return with him, and we will bring my friend away. You will command in my absence, and will remain as near as possible, so as to pick us up. It's all very clear and simple."

"By George! clear and simple! You can't mean it?"

A nod of the head was his only answer, as the two young fellows stared at each other, Dick looking very calm and determined, and Jack decidedly taken aback. As for the crew, who perforce, owing to the limited space aboard the launch, had been interested listeners

to the whole conversation, they had been itching to throw in a word to encourage the order for a dash, for nothing would have pleased these gallant fellows more. But they were intelligent men, and they, too, when the matter was thrashed out before them, could understand the grave risk attached to such an attempt, and the fact that it was not legitimate to undertake it. They could appreciate a brave decision, too, and as their young leader quietly announced his intentions, they set up a cheer, which brought the blood to his cheeks. Jack gripped him by the hand, while Johnnie started from his stoking well, and came a pace nearer.

"Then yo want me," he said eagerly. "Johnnie know de forest, know dese debil Ashanti, and hab no fear. He fight plenty Ashanti."

"I want no one, thank you," came the answer. "I will accompany this native, and I shall hope to be back here two nights from this. 'Bout ship, Jack. We must make these beggars think that we are turning tail. Now, I'll ask this fellow a question. Come here, my man. Will you direct me to the white chief to-night, and return here with him?"

A smile broke out on the wan face of the native, and he showed his teeth.

"I will go gladly," he said. "To the white chief my life is due, and I will repay the debt. Let there be no fear for our safety. These enemies will not expect us, and during the night we shall easily pull up to the creek. In two days, perhaps, we shall return."

All was now bustle and movement aboard the launch, for many preparations for the coming attempt had to be made. Meanwhile, seeing that he could not per-

suade his comrade not to make the journey, Jack Emmett went to the helm and sent the launch back to her course, down the centre of the river. And there he held her, sitting motionless and thoughtful at the tiller, while Dick and his men prepared the native boat. Two rifles and an abundant store of ammunition were placed in her, and to these were added a cooking-pot, some tinned provisions, and a keg of water. That done, and some miles having been covered since they turned towards the sea, the launch was run in toward the bank and anchored, while all threw themselves down beneath the awning to sleep. As evening came, they partook of a meal, and once the night had fallen, they pulled in their anchor and stood up the centre of the river again, their course guided by the faint streak which intervened between the two black lines of forest on either side. A shield of sacking surrounded the top of the funnel, while precautions were taken to hide all trace of light from the fire. In fact, the launch might have been a ghost, so silent and invisible was she.

"Stop her. Bring that boat forward, please."

It was Dick's voice, cool and collected as before.

"Now hold her while we embark. Good-bye, Jack. Good-bye, men. Keep a watch for us to-morrow night. Shove her off."

A dozen hands stretched out to grip his in the darkness, and a dozen voices, gruff and deep, and sunk to a whisper, bade him good luck and good-bye. A push then sent the boat clear of the launch, and within a few seconds she was under way, the dip of the paddles being just distinguishable. That sound soon ceased,

and as the crew of the launch stared disconsolately after their leader, they could neither hear nor see a trace of the boat.

"Good luck to the lad," growled one of the sailors. "Blest if he ain't the pluckiest gentleman as ever I see."

"And if them fellers gets 'im and does for our young orfficer, I tell yer they'll 'ave ter pay, do yer 'ear?" growled another. "Strike me! but we'll give 'em something for interferin'!"

"Silence there, for'ard. 'Bout launch! Steady there with the tiller, and hold your tongues, my lads."

This time it was Jack Emmett's voice, strangely altered. At once there was silence. But the men could think and mutter to themselves, and as they slowly steamed down the dark river that black night, each and all, from their new commander downward, registered a vow that if Dick Stapleton did not soon return, they would find the cause and probe the mystery to the bottom.

CHAPTER XVII

A Well-laid Scheme

"Not a sound. Nothing to disturb us. We have been lucky."

"And the creek lies within an hour's paddling from here, chief. Soon we shall reach the white man who befriended me."

It was still quite dark, though the partial view which the curling river Prahsu allowed of the east showed that there the sky was already streaked with dull grey clouds, and that the day would not be long in coming. It was hours since the native boat had put off from the launch, and the paddles of the two occupants had dipped regularly and monotonously all the while, with an occasional spell of rest. And never once had a sound or suspicion of the proximity of the enemy alarmed them.

"We had better paddle over to the bank and be ready to take cover beneath the trees," said Dick, at last. "I remember that they overhang, and that we can run in beneath them and still paddle. Let us get close to them, and stay outside till the light is brighter."

"Or it may be that we shall be within the creek by then," came the answer. "Then there will be no

danger. We have seen no sign of the enemy near the mine for some days past."

Turning the nose of the native boat towards the bank, they ran her in till she was only a few yards from the long and continuous line of overhanging boughs which clothed the side of the river. And in that position they paddled on till the growing light warned them that longer stay in the open would be dangerous. Then they plunged in beneath the boughs, and continued their passage up the river. Presently a cry from the native attracted Dick's attention.

"The creek, chief," he called out. "We will push on."

He was strangely excited, and now that the goal was in sight plunged his paddle into the water with greater energy, and set the pace so that his white companion had difficulty in keeping time. They surged along through the shallows, dodging the boughs which dropped to the water, and ducking their heads to avoid others which came dangerously near to the boat. It was still hardly light when they shot the boat into the narrow mouth of the creek, though as they rested on their paddles and looked back, the gloom surrounding this narrow and fetid strip of water was deeper when compared with the prospect offered by the river.

"At last," said Dick. "We are here in safety, and still there is no sign of the enemy. Where is Meinheer? Shall we have trouble in finding him?"

"Perhaps a little," was the answer. "He wanders here and there in search of food, and to keep watch lest these Ashanti men should come to the neighbourhood."

"Halt!" whispered Dick, suddenly, for he thought he saw a dark object on the bank. "Look there! Is that some one watching us? There! He has moved away."

They came to a sudden stop, while each peered into the jungle. The native lifted his head to listen, while his white companion stretched out his hand for his rifle and took it across his knees.

"Perhaps a beast of the forest, chief. It was not a man, of that I feel sure. Let us press on, for we might still be seen from the main channel of the river, and see how light it is getting."

Once more they plunged their paddles into the water and sent the boat ahead, though Dick, who sat in the stern, kept his eyes on the forest. His suspicious were aroused, and he was now keenly alert, for he felt almost sure that he had actually seen a man. Then, too, something told him that they were being watched.

"That was a call, too," he said to himself suddenly, as the note of a bird came to his ear. "Of course it may have been all right, but I don't half like it."

He eased his sword in its sheath, and felt for his revolver, which of late he had carried suspended to his shoulder and between his coat and his shirt. There it was out of the way and out of sight, while he found that he could lay hold of it instantly. In fact, it was an excellent position, for whether in a boat or ashore, the weapon, placed where it was, did not strike against objects when he sat down or moved rapidly. A little later the bend in this stagnant creek came into view, and there was the place where the boats had been secured when he was at the mine. He could see the

dark surface of the sluggish stream as it issued from the jungle, and though he peered amidst the trees there was not a man or beast to be seen.

"In a few minutes it will be lighter," said the native. "Then we will land and search. Perhaps the chief will stay here on the bank while I go in search of my friend."

Dick thought for a moment. Would it be wise to land, and perhaps have a dozen or more of the enemy upon him? Would it not be wiser to stay aboard and lie off in the stream? That would give him an enormous advantage in case of attack. But suppose Meinheer were near at hand, and he were seen and followed; he would require help. "You shall go ashore first," he said to the native. "I will wait here, and when you report that all is clear near the landing stage, I will come."

For a moment it seemed as though the man hardly liked the order, for he looked at his companion doubtfully, and fidgeted. Then he thrust his paddle into the water and shot the boat close to the side.

"In a few moments," he said. "I shall quickly decide whether there are enemies about."

He leaped to the bank, giving the boat a push out into the stream, and at once disappeared in the dense jungle. For a little while the crash of twigs and dead boughs told that he was moving, but finally the sounds died down. Once our hero thought he heard the far-off cry of a bird, but he was not sure, and presently his suspicions of danger were set aside by the recurrence of the sounds of some one moving and by the sudden appearance of the native on the bank.

"All is clear," the man called out. "The forest is empty. Even the white chief is nowhere at hand. But we shall find him soon. It is safe for the chief to land."

Satisfied now that his suspicions had been groundless, and yet with the ever-present feeling that there might be, and probably was, some danger to be anticipated, Dick drove his paddle into the water, and sent the nose of the boat into the bank. The native caught the rope and dragged at it, while his master leaped ashore, rifle in hand. Then, together, they pulled the boat half way up on the bank, and made the painter fast to a tree. Not till then did Dick observe a figure creeping towards him through the jungle. He gave a startled cry, and lifted his rifle to his shoulder. Then a second figure came into view, and just as he was in the act of pulling his trigger a dozen natives rushed forward from different directions, while the very man whom he had rescued down the river, and who had brought the note from the Dutchman, leaped on his back, and flung his hands over his face. Then commenced a desperate struggle, for Dick realized in a flash that he was the victim of a ruse; that he had been hoodwinked and decoyed to this place. At the thought his usually placid temper broke its bounds, and in an instant he became furious with rage, while his strength, which at all times was of no mean order, became doubled. With a snarl he dropped the rifle, and ere the men charging down upon him could come to close quarters, he had gripped the wrists of the ruffian who had leaped on his back, and torn the hands from his face. Then he swung the man round, and picking

him up as if he were a child, flung him with furious energy against a huge cotton tree growing just beside him.

By then the others were at hand, and the contest was continued with desperate earnestness. Dick knew that he was cornered, and across his mind the results of capture passed vividly. In a flash he saw himself a prisoner, led to Kumasi, there to be slaughtered. It was a terrible prospect, and the thought of it increased his desperation. His teeth closed tightly together, not a sound escaped his lips in response to the shouts of the enemy. Then his hand flew to his sword; but he had no time to draw it, for one of the enemy, a tall, lanky Ashanti, was already upon him, rushing into close quarters, and wielding an enormous stake. The weapon was already in the air when Dick saw his danger, and he had barely time to leap aside. Then his instinct caused him to make use of nature's weapons, and in a trice his right fist flew out and struck the native full on the forehead, sending him staggering back against the tree at the foot of which lay the body of the native who had acted as decoy. There was a third close at hand by now, but nothing daunted the solitary white man sprang at the stake which had dropped to the ground and seized it. Then the conflict went on with renewed energy on his part. With sweeping blows he held the enemy at bay, and as the more venturesome rushed in, the stake went up with a whirl, there was a crash, and another man fell to the ground.

It was not to be such a one-sided contest after all, and in a little while, when he had cleared the natives farther back, Dick hoped to be able to rush for the

boat, launch it, and push it from the bank. Then would come the time for his revolver, and he promised himself that he would make good use of it. But he had greater trouble to contend with, for the crash of broken boughs in the forest told him that others were near at hand. Indeed, hardly had he realized the fact that the enemy were about to receive reinforcements, when a number of dusky figures appeared, while a man stepped from behind a huge cotton tree. It was the half-caste, James Langdon, saturnine in appearance, looking thin and wan after his long residence with the Ashantis, and showing on his ugly features the same crafty cunning look as had first aroused our hero's suspicion and dislike. He, too, bore a stake in his hand and held it poised above his head. With careful eye he aimed it at the young fellow fighting by the bank of the river; then, with a sudden movement he threw it as if it were a spear, and with such deadly aim that it struck the object on the temple.

Dick fell like a log. Had he been an ox that had been struck a true blow with the pole-axe he could not have fallen more swiftly. One instant he stood there, breathing hard, and whirling his club, defiant and by no means conquered, and the next he lay an inert mass at the feet of the rascal who had decoyed him up the river.

"A fine shot!" shouted the half-caste. "On to him, and make his hands and feet fast. Now a pole, and we will carry him. Later, when he has recovered, he shall drag his own body to Kumasi for the sacrifice."

He stood by with every sign of satisfaction as the natives obeyed his orders, and smiled his cruel smile

as the last of the lashings were completed. By this time a pole had been slashed from the underwood, and with a refinement of cruelty for which this race are known, the Ashantis thrust the pole between Dick's feet and hands, which were held together by the lashings, and prepared to carry him away suspended in that fashion.

"We will look at these comrades of ours," said James Langdon, as they turned to depart. "Ah, our friend, the white fool, struck true and well. The man is stunned. It will be hours before he recovers. Who will wait with him?"

"And risk the coming of this man's friends? None of us," came the answer. "Let him lie, and if he escapes, then he is fortunate. Besides, he has comrades to keep him company."

He pointed to three others who had been struck down by the stake, and at once the half-caste bent over them.

"They are all hit badly, but will regain their senses, I think," he said calmly. "Well, let them lie there and recover while we push on. What of this one, though?"

"Dead!" replied the man who had answered his first question. "I saw him thrown against the tree, and heard the crash. His back is broken and also his head. He will never recover."

"Then fling him into the river and let us be going. After all, he played for a stake, and would have had the bulk of the reward for this fool's capture. But he bungled it. His fingers should have gripped the neck, for then they could not have been so easily grasped.

It is a lesson to us all. Fling him in and pick up your burden."

None of the men seemed to think that there was anything remarkably inhuman in their action, for to these Ashantis human life was very cheap indeed, and kindness and mercy almost unknown qualities. While a man was alive and possessed of full strength he was a comrade to be respected, for he could take care of himself. Dead, however, or badly injured, he was a nuisance, a positive burden, to be rid of at the first moment; to be robbed and deserted, or to be flung into the nearest stream like a dog. Without a thought, therefore, they picked up the man who had played his part so well and flung him with a loud splash into the stagnant stream. Then, without a second look at their unconscious fellows, they turned, picked up the pole, and went off through the forest in the wake of James Langdon.

When Dick regained his senses an hour later his first feeling was one of extreme anguish in both hands and feet, and very soon the pain caused his scattered wits to return, and led him to discover the cause of his trouble. He was suffering tortures, so much so that the agony swamped all thought of his miserable condition as a captive. He struggled, and begged to be set down.

"Cut his legs adrift, then," said James Langdon, brutally. "Now place him on his feet and make a creeper fast to his hands. Better still, lash them behind his back instead of in front; then two of you can hold the end of the creeper."

They threw their prisoner on the ground and cut

both lashings. Then they swung him over on to his face and tied his hands behind, making a long creeper fast to the lashing. A moment later they picked him up and placed him on his feet. He staggered and fell at once, his limbs doubling up beneath him.

"He won't stand, then!" cried the half-caste, his cruel nature delighted at the sight of so much suffering, and at the plight in which he saw the son of his old employer. "Set him up again and hold him there. I will thrash him till he changes his tune and agrees to make good use of his legs."

There was no haste about this ruffian. He drew a sheath knife and went in search of a knotted vine, returning with it, still plying his blade and paring off the small branches attached to it. Then he took his post behind his prisoner.

"Raise him, and stand well aside," he cried, with a gay laugh. "Now we will see how long it takes us to persuade him."

Could the prisoner have freed his hands at that moment and managed to reach his tormentor, he would have taken such a grip of his throat that James Langdon's villainy would have been summarily ended for all time. Dick felt the cruel sting of the lashes as they fell upon his back, across his face, and on his legs and shoulders. But his indignation and rage at such cowardly and dastardly treatment helped to ease the pain. He clenched his fingers, closed his lips firmly, and when he could fixed his gaze upon the ruffian who belaboured him. Then, gradually, as the man tired and his blows lost power, and as the circulation returned to the pris-

oner's legs, he gained sufficient strength to stand, and then to hobble.

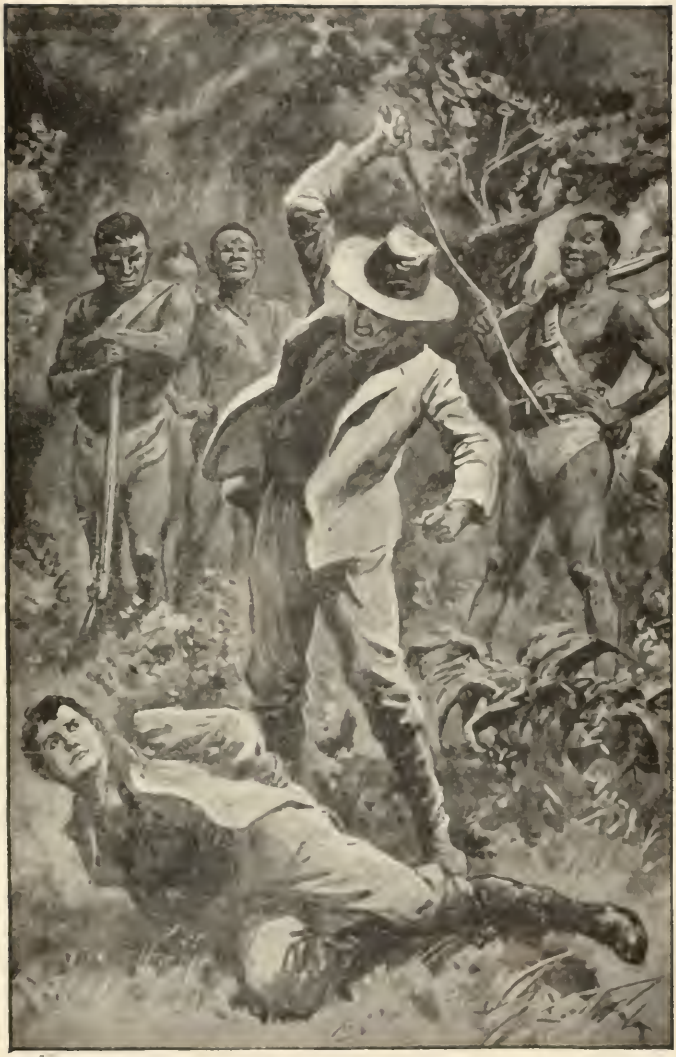
"See what a good healer I am," laughed the half-caste. "Others would have rubbed his legs and feet. I use my whip to his back, and the sulky dog is roused. He finds that it will be as well to walk and do as he is bid."

"And he will find it in him to punish such an act when the time comes," gasped Dick. "I do not threaten, James Langdon, thief and ruffian. I give you due warning. When the time comes, I will shoot you as if you were a wild beast, without notice and without mercy. Vermin such as you are do not deserve ordinary treatment."

For a few seconds the half-caste was taken aback, for at heart he was an arrant coward, and the mere mention of what might happen to him was sufficient to shake his nerve. But he had the game in his own hands now, he flattered himself. This time the youth at whose door he laid all his troubles, the need which drove him to live this life in the jungle, the fever which racked him, and a hundred other evils, was securely bound, a prisoner, from whom no danger was to be apprehended. His words were harmless. He was as helpless as a new-born babe.

"When the time comes I shall be prepared," he said, with a laugh which he vainly endeavoured to make easy and light. "For the present we will advance, and leave threats and chatter till later. Advance, and beat the dog if he shows signs of lagging."

Had the Ashanti warriors who helped in the capture and who now formed the escort had even hearts of



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"DICK FELT THE CRUEL KISS OF THE LASHES"

stone they would have pitied their prisoner. The very fact that he had made a very gallant and determined fight for freedom would have aroused their enthusiasm and respect. But these men of Kumasi had long since had all such feelings driven from their breasts. The constant succession of cruelties of the most frightful nature perpetrated at Kumasi had hardened them to all human feeling and misery. They had, every one of them, from the time when they were mere children, been daily witnesses of executions, of unmeaning and ferocious tortures, and of endless bloodshed. Mercy they had never encountered. There was but one punishment for prisoners and evil-doers alike, for the thief, the murderer, and those whose cruel fate had caused them to be born in slavery. The executioners stretched out their greedy and remorseless hands for all, and who could say when their turn would come? Was it remarkable, therefore, that these men marched on before and behind their prisoner, belabouring him when his steps flagged, and shouting oaths at him? And so, in this sorry plight, his feet tingling still, while his hands felt as if the skin would burst, so tight were the lashings, Dick was hurried on through the dark and sombre forest out to the clearing and to the site where had stood the mine stockade. There, as the procession halted, he threw himself on the ground in an exhausted condition, wishing almost that he might die. His thirst was now unbearable, while his head throbbed and ached from the blow he had received. No wonder, too, if he were apathetic, if his fate were now a matter of little concern to him; for his present miseries overshadowed all else.

"Give him some water, and put him in the shade," ordered the half-caste. "Two of you stand over him with your guns, and if he moves thrash him with the vine. We will teach him how to behave while he is in our hands."

He glared at his prisoner, who took not the slightest notice of him. But as soon as the water was brought Dick drank it greedily, for he was parched. Then he lay down, his hands still secured behind his back, and very soon, utterly wearied by his night's work, and by his struggle with the enemy, he fell fast asleep, enjoying a dreamless rest which was of the greatest service to him.

What would have been the feelings of those gallant souls away down the river had they known of the treachery to which their young leader had fallen a victim! Had they but guessed that the fleeing native was only part of a clever plan, laboriously thought out by the half-caste robber whose thefts had driven him to take to the forests, and who, like so many of those who have wronged the man whose salt they have eaten, had turned all his hate and vengeance upon that man or his representative! But how could they guess? It had all been so real. The native boat appearing at dawn, with a shouting mob in full pursuit, as if the light had only then enabled them to discover the runaway. Their shots, falling recklessly about the boat, and the desperate haste of the native himself, his wound and his apparent exhaustion, had all aided in misleading the crew of the launch. They never imagined that their presence in the river had been instantly detected, and that when they lay to for the night, their

exact whereabouts had come to the ears of James Langdon and his roving band of free-booters. But that was what had happened.

The half-caste had learned that Dick Stapleton had formerly come up the river, and had been taken back to the sea owing to an attack of fever. His spies, of whom there were many on the coast, had told him how the young fellow fared, and had sent news as soon as preparations for another expedition with the launch had been commenced. Then he had hatched his plot to trap his master's son, and with fiendish ingenuity had relied upon the gallantry of his dupe to lead him into the net. What was easier than for this man, accustomed to clerical duties, and, as it chanced, acquainted with Meinheer, to scrawl a few letters on a piece of linen, and sign the Dutchman's name? for he knew well that the fraud in the signature would never be detected. It was a well-planned plot, and had succeeded only too well, though the victim had made a hard fight for his liberty and had given unexpected trouble.

And so while Dick lay there in the shade, fast asleep, the crew of the launch dozed the hours away, knowing well that they could not look for his return till late the following night.

Some few hours after Dick had fallen asleep he was kicked and ordered to stand up.

"We start for Kumasi," said James Langdon, with a leer, "for the seat of the great King Koffee. There is a prospect before you, young man, and you will have time to think about it. Make sure of him," he went on, turning to his followers, "for the captive is no longer mine. He belongs to the King, and it will be

a bad day's work for the one whose carelessness results in his escape. Now, march on, and let us push the pace."

Three days later the procession marched into the town of Kumasi, their prisoner still in their midst, footsore and weary, but with courage undaunted. They passed at once along the principal street, and Dick was astonished to find that it was very wide, that neat huts stood in an orderly line on either side, and that trees grew here and there, offering a welcome shade. The thousands who came to stare and mock at him seemed neat and tidy, though they boasted little clothing, while the whole air of the town was one of prosperity and orderliness. But there was one huge drawback, which attracted the prisoner's attention the instant he set foot in Kumasi, indeed, even before he reached the town. Where there should have been the pleasantest of breezes there was the most ghastly and nauseating odour of dead men, and as the procession advanced the cause of this became more and more apparent. For Kumasi was like a charnel house. The bodies of the hundreds of poor wretches who were slain were simply thrown into the nearest stagnant stream, or were piled in a narrow grove, the fetish grove, adjacent to the house of execution. In truth, the smell of blood was everywhere, and on every hand dark stains told of its presence. No wonder that he shuddered, while his courage began to evaporate.

"How awful!" he thought. "The place makes one feel deadly sick, and the sights on either side are shocking. If that is to be the end, then the sooner the better. But I am not done yet. I will have a try for

freedom, and it may be that I shall succeed. To think I have been made a fool of, and that letter was a forgery. Poor old Meinheer is dead after all."

Even in the depths of his misery he could think unselfishly of others, of the unfortunate Dutchman whose name had been sufficient to bring his young agent to this plight. A moment later his thoughts were interrupted by James Langdon.

"The lions have had a good view of him," he laughed, as he nodded to the crowd, who evidently held the half-caste in some awe. "In a little while he shall afford them more sport, and they shall see what sort of a captive I have brought them. Pack him into the hut here, next to mine, and watch him while I go to the King. My servant will see to his food. Cut his lashings and bundle him in."

A man produced his sword, and the lashings were cut. Then, with the smallest ceremony, Dick was bundled into the hut, a one-roomed erection, smelling evilly, and almost devoid of light. But it was his for the moment, and he revelled in the opportunity it gave him to be alone. He sat down in one corner, feeling weary and sore from head to foot, while the evil smell of the place made him horribly sick. He was faint and giddy, and when at length the food was brought which was to be his evening meal, he pushed it from him.

He was down again with fever. No white man can live in the heart of the Ashanti forests, particularly on the river, without subjecting himself to the risk of incessant fever attacks, and once the malady has been gained, the paroxysms are apt to recur very often.

Hardship, privation and excitement generally are sufficient to cause them to return, and it is therefore not wonderful to have to record that Dick Stapleton was again a victim. His teeth chattered, he was miserably cold in spite of the fact that the temperature in this stuffy hut was almost unbearable, and he had no appetite. Indeed, he was soon semi-delirious, and it was not till many weeks had passed that he was himself again. The fever, want of nursing, unsatisfactory foods, and incarceration in the hut did their work too thoroughly, so that on this occasion he was longer in recovering. And when he was stronger, and was allowed to step from the hut, it was to find Kumasi in a ferment, to discover the house of execution fully occupied, and the bodies of fresh victims everywhere. For the British advance had begun. Sir Garnet Wolseley, the energetic and indefatigable worker, was already on the way to the capital of the Ashantis, with a goodly following of troops behind him.

CHAPTER XVIII

King Koffee, the Terrible

Kumasi was in an uproar. The long, wide street which cut through the heart of the huge town was alive with Ashanti warriors, and with shrieking women and children. There was consternation on every face, and fierce anger at the news which had just come from the river Prahsu.

"Your soldiers have bridged the river and are about to advance," growled James Langdon, as he threw the door of the prison hut open and accosted Dick. "These fools here think that their fetish will prevail and keep the British back. I know better, for I have seen British troops. They will reach this place, and perhaps give it to the flames. Then they will retire, and as they go we shall fall upon them and cut them to pieces. You need not think that they will find you here. You are a marked man, and, at the last, when the advance still takes place, the Ashantis will offer you to their fetish in the hope that your sacrifice will arrest the enemy. It would have been better for you, Dick Stapleton, had you never interfered with me."

"And by the look of you, it would have been easier for you had you hanged yourself weeks ago," answered

our hero, calmly, and with a smile which made his captor writhe. "You look as though you were haunted, and I think that you must have had a very miserable time since you left the coast. You are a traitor and a murderer, and you are bound to be caught and punished."

"Not if I rejoin the British. What if I set you and the other Europeans free! Would you obtain a pardon?"

Dick emphatically shook his head, for he mistrusted this man. More than that, he was wise enough to know that even though James Langdon might desire to do as he said, the Ashantis would never permit such action. A glance at the face of the half-caste was sufficient to show that he was ill at ease. Matters were beginning to look serious for King Koffee and his people, and the very sight of this half-caste, who had urged them to action and to resistance, angered them. They had lost faith in him, and James Langdon knew that at any time the King's favour might be withdrawn and he himself fall a victim. He turned away with an oath. Then he called for the guard which kept watch over the house, and gave an order. At once Dick was bound and led off down the street, and having reached a wide open space, close to the horrible fetish grove, he was brought to a halt within a few paces of the enormous sacrificial bowl, with its legs in the form of crouching lions, on the edge of which the Ashantis were wont to slay their victims. Never in all his life had he seen such a hideous sight.

"Terrible! terrible!" he murmured. "To think that men could be such brutes! It is horrible!"

He closed his eyes for a little while, and then opened them again as there was a commotion. Then, indeed, he gave a start, for four white men were slowly led into the arena, all strangers to him, and all miserable prisoners like himself. They looked at him sharply, and one of them called out a greeting.

"Sorry to see you here," he said, with a foreign accent. "How long have you been a prisoner?"

"About six weeks. And you?"

"A year perhaps. We had hoped to be freed by the payment of a ransom. Now I suppose we must wait for the troops if these brutes will allow us. There is never any saying what they may do. To-day there will be a great sacrifice, and we are always dragged here to witness the awful scene. What news?"

He asked the question eagerly, and in a few words Dick narrated how Sir Garnet had landed and commenced operations, and how by now the troops must be at the coast and probably on the march up.

"Then that accounts for this butchery. They are trying to stop the advance, and these poor people have to suffer. Shut your eyes as long as you can, my lad. I'm hardened."

But Dick could not. He looked on with dilated eyes and shuddered, for the next three hours were indeed too horrible to relate. Some hundreds of wretched slaves and prisoners were ruthlessly slaughtered, while the mob looked on, gloating. But happily for the white prisoners, there was little noise, only an occasional shriek from some waiting victim. The poor wretches were led to the bowl, and knives were thrust through their cheeks so that they could not utter

a sound. Then their heads were forced over the edge of the bowl, and with a sweep of the sacrificial knife they were decapitated.

"It's done with for to-day," at last said the prisoner who had spoken before, addressing Dick, wearily. "A few score more of these poor people have been killed—men, women and children, and now the last test of all has been carried out. The fetish priests have said that if men who are tied up in the forest and left alone die quickly, the Ashantis will be victorious. If they live for many days the British will succeed. They have put knives through the cheeks of two of the captives and have led them away. It's all very horrible and very terrible. But never fear, things may come right yet. By the way, who is that sallow dog who fights with the Ashantis and advises them? See him there. He is watching and listening."

Dick did not answer, for James Langdon suddenly emerged from the crowd, where he had hidden himself the better to watch his prisoner. Now, however, he came forward at a run, and stood in front of the man who had spoken.

"Sallow dog, you call me," he cried angrily. "I will tell you who I am. I am the one who has so far kept you white men alive, and to me you may look for the order which will bring you here again for execution. That is your answer."

He scowled at the prisoner and then went off, giving an order as he left the arena. At once the guards closed round the prisoners, and all were marched away, Dick being taken back and flung into his hut. He sat down at once with his back to the wall, and his eyes

fixed on the door, and for an hour he hardly stirred a finger. Now and again his eyes moved a little, as the light which streamed beneath the door altered, and the shadow of a passing man crossed it. Otherwise he allowed nothing to disturb his thoughts.

"I will do it," he said at last, rising to his feet and pacing up and down. "I am strong now, and once away I can live in the forest with ease, for there are plantains everywhere. I will make an attempt this very night, and if I fail, well it will only hasten my death by a very few hours."

"Food and water. Take it!"

The door was thrown open by the man appointed to feed the captive, and a bundle of plantains tossed into the hut. An earthen pot containing water was set down just inside the hut, and then the door was slammed, for the man was in a hurry. Like all the inhabitants of Kumasi, he was eager to go into the forest to watch the poor wretches tied up there, and to listen to news of the invaders. The guards also, two of whom were set to watch the hut, had their attention distracted on this day, for as Dick peered through the crevices in the door he could see them gossiping with the passers-by, and straying far from the hut. When darkness fell the town was still in a state of agitation, for further news had come of a British victory, and the watch on the hut was even more careless. But the Ashantis had not entirely forgotten their prisoner, as Dick soon discovered. For as he looked out into the wide street, watching the numerous almost nude figures seated about the fires, and the warriors passing to and fro, a gentle grating on the far side of

the door warned him that he might expect a visitor. As quick as a flash he crossed the floor and sank to the ground on the far side, where he feigned to be asleep. He had hardly gained this position when the door was burst open, and two men entered, the second bearing a torch.

"Gone! He has escaped! Those dogs have let him go! Ah, no! He is here!"

The half-caste clenched his hands, and turned furiously upon the native bearing the torch, for as he entered, the half light cast by the flame had illuminated only a portion of the hut, and he imagined that the prisoner had gone. Then he caught sight of his figure in the corner, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Safe!" he exclaimed, with a growl of satisfaction. "Not escaped. That is good. Have we disturbed your sleep?"

Dick looked up wearily, blinking at the light, and then seeing who it was, and pretending that he had only just discovered the presence of his enemy, he rolled over again, treating him with scorn and silence, as was his custom.

For a little while the half-caste and his attendant stared at him thoughtfully, then they turned and left the hut.

"I felt ill at ease," Dick heard James Langdon mutter; "I fancied that he had escaped, and I came to see for myself. I can sleep peacefully now if I do not dream of these British."

He clenched his hands again as he moved away, and Dick heard him muttering still as the door was slammed. Then came the sound of his steps, a fierce

kick as he pushed open the door of his own abode, and a sharp crash as he swung it to again.

"Sick and weary," thought Dick. "His conscience is hurting him, or rather, perhaps, he begins to feel the net closing round him. We shall see. I gave him due warning, and if the time comes I will kill him as if he were a fly. Now for business."

He rose stealthily to his feet and went to the door, where he remained for some minutes staring out into the street, and taking note of the position of his guards. Then he went in succession to some half-dozen tiny peep-holes, which he had diligently bored through the wattle wall of the hut.

"All clear," he said, with a satisfied chuckle. "It's quite dark now, and as these people go to bed early the place will soon be quiet. I'll give the guards a little time to settle down and then I'll move. This is the side for operations."

He went to the wall which faced the hut in which dwelt the half-caste and set to work upon it. Slipping his hand into his sleeve, he produced an angular piece of iron, a fragment of a cooking-pot which he had picked up in a corner of the hut. Many an hour had he spent in sharpening an edge of the fragment upon a stone dug up from the dried mud floor, and now it was as keen as a razor. Holding it firmly in his hand, he swept it slowly and in a circle over the wattle wall, his fingers following the cut. Then he repeated the process, very slowly and very carefully, severing the stems one by one. Like all the habitations in Kumasi, the prison in which he was incarcerated was built of wattle, woven roughly together, and plastered with

mud to fill the interstices. Thus when he had contrived to cut through the stems a large piece of the wall was freed, with the mud still clinging to it. Dick swung it open very slowly and peeped out. Then he replaced the section, and once more went the round of the hut, peering in all directions. Not a soul was moving, and even the guards had thrown themselves down beside the log fire disconsolately, for the news received that day was most disheartening.

"Not time to move yet," he thought. "They look quiet enough, but they are not sleepy. I'll wait a little, and then we'll see what happens."

An hour later he swung the section open and stared out. Then he squeezed through the opening and threw himself flat on the ground. Wriggling a few inches along beside the hut he soon obtained an unobstructed view of the street, and could see the twinkle of the dying embers, with, here and there, a figure crouching over them. There were the guards, too, drowsing near one of the fires, their weapons dangling beside them. A dog barked in the distance, and for a little while a number of the curs which infested the streets of the horrible town set up a chorus of responsive howls, which were more than disconcerting. One of the guards stirred, while a man who had been crouching over one of the distant fires, no doubt thinking of the fighting in prospect, rose and sauntered along till he arrived near the hut, where he opened up a conversation on the same old subject.

"They are at the Prahsu, these white dogs," he said. "What will be our fortune now? What think you, comrade?"

"How should I know or be able to guess?" was the sulky answer. "Go to our fetish men. Or better, be patient for a little. There are the dogs whom we have bound out in the forest. If they die to-morrow we conquer. If not——"

"We die. We shall do that. Listen to one of them groaning. Is that the call of a dying man?"

He held up his hand and pointed across the street, and away across the enclosure where the executions had taken place, to the forest beyond, and as he pointed there came the call of a man in pain, strong and clear, and full of power.

Dick shuddered, while the guards and their visitor became suddenly silent. They had much to think about, and could obtain little comfort from their wise men and soothsayers. The auguries were all against them. Strange things were happening. The tale was abroad that a child had just been born who was able to converse fluently immediately after its birth. Then some falling star had struck the town. And now, the men who had sat so patiently at the coast, were advancing in spite of sacrifices, in spite of a liberal shedding of blood. There was little comfort for the Ashantis. Talking made matters worse. It was better to go to the privacy of one's own hut and brood alone over the trouble.

Dick heard the stranger bid good-night. Then he watched his figure disappearing. A minute later he was on his feet, creeping across the dark patch of ground intervening between his prison and the next habitation, where James Langdon dwelt.

For a moment we must leave Dick, while we turn

to the leader of the British expedition at the coast, and see what arrangements he had made for the difficult task before him. For this campaign was no trifling affair. It was not an ordinary war, wherein battles of great importance might be expected, with open fields for manœuvring, but a conflict wherein our troops and their leaders would have to engage with many unexpected difficulties, and meet face to face a danger greater than that offered by the enemy. It was bad enough at the coast, where there were cool, fresh breezes on occasion, though to be sure the place had well earned its name of "the white man's grave," but up-country, in the forest and jungle, with its numerous swamps, its unhealthy exhalations, its damp heat, and its rotting vegetation, there lurked the germs of fever, the worst form of ague, that fell disease which has slain so many men of our race, and with which it may be rightly said our scientists are only now becoming fully acquainted. Its symptoms, its shivering attacks, its racking fevers they know well, as intimately as they can be known; as also the fact that recurrences take place, that many a man long since returned to England has attacks of jungle fever, or whatever he may care to term it. But the method of transmission of this malady to human beings was not so certain a matter, and few knew then rightly how to battle with it. It was, in fact, the enemy to be contended with, and had any one doubted that, he had only to ask at the coast and sum up the number of men and officers already placed *hors de combat* on its account. This was first and foremost to be a doctors' war, and when all available precautions were taken, it became next a war

against forest and jungle, and the foes who might be lurking there.

To reach Kumasi was no light undertaking, even if no opposition were to be expected, and the decision to advance upon it by land made the difficulty all the greater. It would be hard to say who was responsible for this, though it would seem that those at home, wholly unacquainted with the coast perhaps, were allowed to have a say in the matter. In any case materials were sent out for erecting a light railway, and were disembarked at great cost and labour. And with what result? It was hard enough to cleave a path thirty inches wide through the jungle and forest, let alone one of five feet; while the necessary transport was not forthcoming. And so the railway material lay where it had been landed, while labourers and carriers were employed from amongst the natives, hundreds of whom had flocked to the town owing to the incursions of the Ashantis. Sappers set them their tasks, and as the weeks crept on a path was hewn through the forest in a direct line to the Prahsu. Sometimes open ground relieved the labour, and here and there stations were formed, and food and ammunition collected. At last the bend of the river was reached, and unhindered by the enemy, who were in the vicinity, the sappers bridged it and laid out a little town for the accommodation of the troops and the small escort sent to defend this advance station. Finally the promised troops came, and the advance commenced. Of the force engaged the bulk may be said to have been British, for our native allies, with few exceptions, proved useless cowards. A few men of the

Assim tribe made excellent scouts under Lord Gifford, while other natives did like service. But for fighting the majority were hopeless, and very rightly no dependence was placed upon them. Elsewhere, operating from another quarter, was a larger force of more reliable natives, from the Lagos district, close to Benim, under command of Captain Glover, and though their actions were of little service, a small portion of the force was to be heard of later. They were operating on the Rio Volta, the river forming the boundary between the Gold and Slave Coasts.

It must not be supposed that because the Ashantis, who had invaded the protectorate, hesitated to interfere with the working parties hewing a road to the Prahsu and carrying supplies there, they did not come into conflict with our marines and bluejackets who, in many cases, formed the garrison at the depots which had been formed. Those at Dunquah, a place some twenty-odd miles from the coast, had a smart brush with the enemy, while at Abracampa a huge force of Ashantis, numbering ten thousand at least, suddenly surrounded the post. Like so many of the others, it was but a native village, placed in a small natural clearing, and now roughly fortified. The garrison was a very slender one indeed, and yet in spite of that fact they held the enemy at bay, killing very many of them. Time and again the attacks were repeated, till at length reinforcements arrived, and taking the enemy unawares dispersed them with great slaughter. In the enemy's camp numerous rifles, guns, umbrellas and war-drums were found, besides evidences of sacrifices. In fact, wherever the Ashantis had been, grim relics were left

behind, all of which only added to the keenness of our men to reach Kumasi and put a stop to such barbarities.

And now the prospect was brighter. The second battalion of the Rifle Brigade was already *en route*, while the Welsh Fusiliers and the Black Watch were a little way in the rear. On the road also were Royal Artillery, Engineers, Marines, surgeons, Commissariat officers, and war correspondents, amongst the last the familiar figure of G. A. Henty, whose name must be well known to thousands and thousands of boys and grown men, and whose active brain created heroes in every country and clime under the sun.

From Cape Coast Castle the troops marched to Inquabin as a first stage, and from there through various stations, all with more or less unpronounceable names, till they came finally to the Prahsu, sixty-nine miles from the sea. There they found Sir Garnet completing his preparations for the march upon Kumasi. The troops had toiled for the most part in single file along the narrow forest tracks, and they knew that the same work was before them. But they did not know what their leaders had taken to heart; that the forest on the far side of the river might and probably did hide thousands of enemies, and that that tract must be crossed, and the town of Kumasi captured within the next fortnight. For already there were not wanting signs that the rains were about to commence, and when they set in tracks through the forests would become swamps and narrow streams great swirling rivers. Worse than all, rain and wet soon play havoc with a man, and in a fever-stricken country, such as the land of Ashanti, predispose to an immediate attack.

Having dealt with the movement of the troops, and shown how Sir Garnet and his men had diligently pushed forward to the Prahsu, and had, by dint of bush fighting, and particularly by their actions at Dunquah and Abracampa, driven the Ashantis from the protectorate, we can now return to Kumasi.

The night was rather dark, but fine. Overhead the stars twinkled, and could be seen through the leaves of the trees which lined the main street. One tree grew in front of each house or hut, and was fetish or sacred. At its roots were placed odd bits of crockery, a rough doll-shaped image, and other objects, all regarded as fetish and likely to lull the anger of the mighty fetish which kept the people in its grip, and which held sway at the execution house and temple to which Dick had been led.

"If it had been raining it would have been better, perhaps," thought the escaping prisoner. "But I don't know. All depends on the luck I have. The plan may work well, and our friend may find himself caught in a net of my weaving this time. If so, then I shall not mind the light so much. Now for the chance to enter."

He had crept across the open space between the two huts, and was now close against the wattle wall behind which James Langdon was sleeping. As he lay at full length Dick could hear the ruffian's deep breathing, and when a few minutes had passed could catch his mutterings. He stirred, and Dick heard the soft bed of palm-leaves, upon which he lay, rustle at the movement. But our hero made no attempt at escape, nor did he move from his position. He waited, as calmly

as he could, though it was hard to smother his excitement and still the thumping of his heart. There was so much to be attempted, and such a terrible ordeal to look forward to if he failed. Across his mind's eye flashed the memory of that awful scene close to the brass sacrificial bowl. The rows of intended victims, forced to look on at the sacrifice, their hunted looks, and the agony on the face of the one about to be sacrificed. Then there was the mob, with the warriors dancing their wild dance of death and brandishing their weapons; while in the background, smug and complacent, like Nero of old, sat King Koffee, tall and fat, nodding a signal when the moment for execution came. For half an hour, as Dick crouched in the shadow, the memory of the horrid scene flitted continuously before him. Then he stood up suddenly and clenched his hands together.

"I won't let such things take my pluck away," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I'll think of the friends on the river and at the coast. This brute is responsible for all my miseries, and it is his turn to suffer. He has brought me here. Well, he shall help me to return."

He pulled up the cuffs of his tattered sleeves, as if to prepare for a struggle, then he crept round to the door of the house. There was a native stool there, a heavy article, and he grasped it and lifted it well above his head. Then, without hesitation, he knocked loudly upon the door.

CHAPTER XIX

Dick Strikes a Blow

BANG! Dick's knuckles struck the door of the native hut with a sharp rap, and he repeated the knock immediately. Then he listened eagerly for some sound from the sleeper within. There was no answering call, and nothing to denote that the man was there.

"Fast asleep," thought Dick. "But he is there, I know, for on the far side I could hear his breathing. I'll knock again."

He was in the very act of doing so when out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of one of the drowsy guards who lay beside the dying fire. The man had, apparently, heard the knock, and had sat up now to see what it meant. Then he sauntered towards the prisoner's hut as if to investigate the matter. The escaping prisoner's heart stood still, while his wits worked rapidly.

"If I returned and crept through they might discover the opening, and then good-bye to liberty," he thought. "If I stay here he will see me. I'll get behind the hut, and if there is an alarm I'll run for it. Yes, that will be the best plan."

He watched the guard closely as he rose to his feet, and then silently slid along behind the hut. And as he did so the native strolled towards the place where the half-caste lived and peered at the door. Then he retraced his steps to the prison, and throwing the catch down, stared in. Once more the prisoner held his breath while he tingled with excitement. He stood on his toes, ready at the first alarm to sprint away down the street, while his eye rapidly picked out the most likely path to take. Then he heaved a sigh of relief, relief the like of which none can appreciate but those who have found themselves in similar positions. The guard must have mistaken a shadow, perhaps a portion of the palm-leaf bed, for the prisoner, and been satisfied. He emerged from the hut, and once more sauntered up to the door of the one in which James Langdon lay. As he did so, a sound within told that the sleeper had awakened. He stirred, came to the door and threw it open, staring out at the man suspiciously.

"You knocked?" he exclaimed. "It roused me, but I was heavy with sleep and did not rise at once. What is wrong? You have let the prisoner escape! Dog! You have let him go at the very last moment!"

He sprang from the doorway and gripped the man by the throat, digging his fingers in till the native choked and dropped his musket. His eyes dilated; he struggled with all his might, striking fiercely at the half-caste, and then suddenly became limp. Indeed, when James Langdon released his hold, the man fell helpless to the ground. But it seemed that he was more frightened than hurt, for Dick had long since discovered that all in Kumasi treated the rascal who

had decoyed him into captivity with unusual deference, owing perhaps to his friendship with the King, though of late his power had been declining as that of the British rose. The native gasped, held up an arm, and endeavoured to speak, while the half-caste stood over him with the musket as if he would club his brains out with the butt.

"Say he is gone and I will kill you on the spot," growled the ruffian. "If he is safe, well and good. You shall be uninjured. But why, then, did you knock?"

"Knock! I was lying at the fire keeping watch on the prison when I heard a sound and came to see what it was. Doubtless, some one moved in a neighbouring hut and disturbed me and you also. Then I went to the prison, and found the dog there, fast asleep in his corner."

"But some one knocked. I swear that. It roused me, I tell you!"

The native rose feebly to his feet and glanced askance at the half-caste.

"It must be as I say," he ventured. "The sound came from some other hut. In any case, the prisoner is safe."

He went off to his fire again, muttering beneath his breath, for of late the ruffian who had taken up the cause of the Ashantis had been somewhat curious in his manner. Gathering troubles, perhaps an uneasy conscience, and the ever-present dread of impending punishment, which seemed to come closer and closer in spite of all his efforts, were having their effect. His temper was harsh and easily aroused, he was hard to

please, and wore nowadays a haggard look, showing clearly that his sleep was disturbed.

"Dreams! dreams!" growled the sentry, as he took his seat again. "Dreams and the fire-water which he has been drinking. It is said that he and the King sit in the palace of a night, smoking and taking fire-water. No wonder he sees and hears things which do not exist. I have felt the same myself."

And the same conclusion must have been dawning upon the troubled mind of the rascal standing at his door. He began to wonder whether he had actually heard the knocking, or whether it was another of those dreadful nightmares which had troubled him of late, in which a huge bluejacket, with bristling beard, had stood above him waiting for the word to thrust his cutlass to his heart. He groaned, then stretched his arms and yawned, and turned towards the prisoner's hut. He walked a few paces in that direction, and, seeming to change his mind and be satisfied with the tale of the sentry, he turned about and entered the hut again. Dick at once stole round to the door, his stool still grasped in his hand.

"I would rather have it like that," he thought. "He is awake and able to take care of himself. He had a revolver strapped at his belt, and therefore is armed, far better than I am. He shall have a glimpse of me, and then—— Well, it is his life or mine, and I have given him warning."

There was no time to hesitate, and though Dick would have scorned to strike a defenceless man, he had every excuse for making an attack upon this rascal who had so often injured him. He hardened his

heart, therefore, and having ascertained that the guard, who had so recently appeared, was seated near the fire some little distance away, and with his back turned in that direction, he slipped up to the door and knocked ever so gently.

"Again! It is a knock! I am not mistaken. Well!"

James Langdon, boiling over with indignation, and with his fiery temper fully roused, strode to the door revolver in hand and threw it open. Then he fell back a pace in sheer amazement, while he stood for an instant staring at the figure barring his path. Used to the dense darkness of the interior of the native hut, his eyes picked out the features of his prisoner almost instantaneously. It was his turn to gasp this time. The suddenness of the apparition took his breath away and robbed him of his energy. Then, in a flash, he realized that this must actually be his prisoner, the youth to whom he put down all his miseries. A snarl escaped him, and his fingers closed tighter on his weapon. In less than a second he would have had it at Dick's head and pulled the trigger had not the latter acted. He was satisfied now; he was attacking an armed man who had due and proper warning. Dick struck with the swiftness of lightning, the heavy stool hitting the half-caste across forehead and face and knocking him senseless. But the matter was not finished yet, and as the rascal fell, Dick was swift to follow up his advantage. He clutched at the man and lowered him gently to the floor. Then he took his revolver, and, throwing himself on his knees, peered out at the sentry. The man had turned on his elbow and

87

"DICK STRUCK WITH THE SWIFTNESS OF LIGHTNING"

was looking towards the hut, for he had heard the sound of the blow and he was not quite satisfied.

"Fighting with his shadow," he growled at length. "It will be a good thing for us when the fire-water kills him, or a British bullet settles his account. But for him I should be sleeping in comfort, and not sitting here, feeling as if I still had his fingers about my gullet. Bah! Let him dream! Let him shoot himself if he wishes."

The fellow expressed little surprise when, some few minutes later, the figure of the half-caste emerged from the hut and stood out in the open. The native watched him through half-closed eyes, while one hand sought for his musket.

"At the risk of my life I will shoot him if he lays a hand on me again," he said. "But it would lead to certain execution."

The figure stood lolling against the wall of the hut, with his hat drawn down over his eyes, his collar turned up at his ears, while his hands were sunk in his pockets. He was cold. He shivered and then stamped his feet. A little later he began to pace backward and forward, and as if a sudden thought had occurred to him, went to the door of the prison. He threw it open, glanced in, and then shut and barred the door again with every sign of satisfaction.

"Safe and sound," he said. "He will not escape the knife of the executioner. You can go. You and your comrade. I cannot sleep, and will keep watch myself."

Astonishment and delight were written on the features of the guard, but he did not demur. The oppor-

tunity to be rid of a hated duty was too good to be ignored, and at once, rousing his comrade, the two went off down the street. And Dick watched them as he lolled there, hands in his breeches pockets. He had taken an enormous risk in acting as he had done, but he felt that it was the surest way to regain his liberty. He argued with much justice that dressed in the clothes of the half-caste he would be taken for that ruffian, while the darkness would hide all deficiencies. As to the voice, he could simulate that. He could speak gruffly, as if the night air affected his throat, while he had sufficient command of the language now to carry the plan out fully. And so far it had succeeded.

"Which means that my escape will probably not be discovered till to-morrow morning. Perhaps not even then. That will give me a start, and with a little luck I shall be able to get well away. Now for food and ammunition."

He dived into James Langdon's hut again, and searched for the articles which he required. Some minutes later he reappeared, and having ascertained that the coast was clear, he strode down the wide street of Kumasi, his eyes peering in all directions in search of an enemy. He had arrived at a point only a little distance removed from the opposite end of the town, when a sound suddenly startled him. It was the voice of a man in agony—a deep, heart-rending groan, which brought him to an abrupt halt, and set him listening to its repetition.

"One of the poor beggars whom these ruffians tied up in the forest to die," he said to himself. "If I could I'd help him. But how can I manage such a thing?

I'd not leave this place without trying to rescue the other Europeans if I thought that possible. But it's not. They are scattered, and the attempt would be fatal. My word! what cruelty!"

The groan came to his ears again, and after it a second, deeper in tone, as though forced from the lips of the wretch who uttered it by the utmost depths of misery and pain. It was horrible! If Dick's blood had stirred at the sight of the cruelties perpetrated by the executioners, it boiled now at the thought of those two unhappy natives, captives of the Ashantis, who had been tied up in the forest, their cheeks perforated with the knives to hold down the tongue so that they could not talk, and left there to moan and die soon if the fates were to be kind to Kumasi and its King, and to the unfortunate victims also, or to live on in abject suffering for many days, till thirst and starvation brought unconsciousness.

"I'll go to them," he said, after a minute's thought. "I can't leave this awful place with their groans in my ears. I'll risk releasing them, and perhaps they may help me."

His resolution was made and adhered to in spite of the obvious delay and danger it would cause. But he had a soft heart, and could not bear to think of such misery. Turning aside he slipped down between two of the houses and came to a fœtid stream, in which, no doubt, lay the bodies of many of yesterday's victims. He crossed it in safety, standing back a little way and jumping as far as possible into the darkness. Then there were other houses to pass, and another row of dying embers, before none of which could he

see a single Ashanti. They were all abed, and the only denizens of this loathsome place who were awake were a few stray mongrel curs, one of which started from its lair beside one of the houses, and hearing the thud of Dick's feet as he landed on the far side of the stream, set up a loud barking, which was taken up almost instantly by a score of others elsewhere. But suddenly a gruff voice from within one of the huts commanded silence, and the baying ceased.

"Then I can go on," said Dick. "I thought it was going to lead to more trouble, for if the dogs were to sight me they would follow, making enough noise to awake the whole of the town. Here we are. Here is the forest, and I fancy I am in the right direction."

It was still very dark, and, in fact, had it not been for the many fires, he would hardly have found his way as he had done. Perhaps he would have blundered against one of the huts, or even come upon some wanderer. Not that he would therefore have been discovered to be an escaping prisoner. He would have carried out his *rôle* of being the half-caste, and if that failed there was the revolver. But fortune favoured our hero on this occasion, and in a little while he gained the forest and plunged into its black depths. Groping his way blindly through it, striking his shins against fallen boughs and trunks of trees, and sometimes almost breaking his head against similar obstructions, he finally found himself on a native path, along which the way was easy.

"A piece of great luck," he thought, "and this probably leads to the spot where the poor fellows are im-

prisoned. I'll keep along for a little, and then give them a whistle."

But he had no need to do that, for after a little while, when he had traversed some fifty yards or more, the same miserable groan came to his ear, and gave him indisputable evidence of the proximity of the captives. A few minutes later he was close to them, and, passing to the two trees to which they were bound, ran his hands over their bodies. The miserable natives had been placed some two feet from the ground against the trunks of enormous cotton trees, and their hands and feet had been dragged backwards by means of ropes, and so tightly that they did not slip to the ground. The agony of such a position can be imagined, and if to that be added the torture of two native knives thrust right through the cheeks, some estimate can be obtained of the barbarities practised by the Ashantis, of their insane and meaningless cruelty, and of the urgent need there was for some more enlightened nation to come to the town and stop the practice. Dick slid his hand up to the cheek of the first of the unhappy men, and gently withdrew the knives. Then he spoke to him in low tones.

"Who are you?" he asked, first in Ashanti, and then in the Fanti tongue.

"We are Assims," came the answer, low and indistinct, for the knives had almost robbed the man of the power of speech. "We were captured months ago and imprisoned at Kumasi. Who are you?"

"A white man from the coast, also a prisoner, till an hour ago. Will you swear to follow me if I set you free?"

There was no mistaking the earnestness of the reply, or the man's eagerness to be cut free of his lashings.

"Release us, and we shall owe you our lives," he answered. "We are set here to die, and if you give us life and liberty, we will follow you and fight for you. We are allies of the great white chiefs, and you can trust us."

Without more ado Dick took one of the ghastly knives and cut the man down, doing the same for his comrade a minute later. Stretching them with all care and gentleness on the ground, he set to work to rub their limbs, for it was not so long ago that he had experienced the cruel result of tight lashings. He had known what it was to feel a tingling in his extremities, and then acute pain, as if feet and hands would burst. And later, when the cords were cut loose, the agony of returning life to his limbs, the inability to move finger or toe or to support his weight. And to cure him the inhuman monster who had borne the name of James Langdon had thrashed him till strength had come. Well, the half-caste was dead. Dick had struck him a blow which had crushed in his skull as if it had been an egg-shell, and thinking of it now as he rubbed the limbs of these poor fellows, he could only rejoice, and congratulate himself that he had done bare justice.

"It was man to man," he thought. "He deserved his death, and he had due warning. It was not as if I had knocked and then struck him in the darkness of the hut. I gave him a chance, and—well, the best man won. Now, how are you both?"

The poor fellows were trembling with joy, and wept

freely. By now they had regained to some extent the use of their hands, and they, too, rubbed at their feet till they were able to stand and hobble a few paces.

"We will wait till you are quite able to walk," said Dick. "We have far to go to-night, and it will be better to sacrifice a few minutes here than to lose them on the road. Do not hurry. Soon you will be strong again."

"We are fit to go now," at last said the spokesman of the two. "Where will the white man turn his face?"

"To the Pra. Our troops are there, and if we can meet them we are safe. Do either of you know the road?"

There was an exclamation from both at once.

"We have marched it time and again," said one. "As slaves we have accompanied the Ashanti armies, and we can find the road even in the dark. But we must be careful. There are thousands of men about, and if we met them we should be killed."

"Then you will want weapons. Pick up the knives and tuck them in your waist cloths. Now lead the way. Better still. We will cut a vine and hold on to it. Then there will be no straggling."

A little later the three set out, the leader setting the direction along the path without a moment's hesitation.

"It will lead us to the main war road," he explained, "and after that all will be easy. There is but one way to the Pra, for the forest is too thick for many paths to be cut. Follow, white chief, and I will take you to the river."

All that night the trio kept on through the forest,

their way made easy by the path cut and kept free of undergrowth with constant labour. Now and again they would call a halt, for the two captives whom Dick had rescued were still very feeble, and their feet and ankles were greatly swollen. But it is wonderful what an amount of ill-treatment a native can put up with at times, and how marvellously they recover from the most serious of wounds. True, they have as a rule little stamina, and sickness cuts them down by the hundred. But perhaps because of the life they lead these natives of Africa often show less sensitiveness to pain than do Europeans, and therefore can put up with injuries which with the majority of white men would prove quickly fatal. And so, in spite of the hours that these men had been dangling, they were able to march, for the wounds in the cheeks were of small consequence. When day dawned many miles intervened between themselves and Kumasi.

"We will seek for a hiding place and rest," said Dick, as the light beneath the trees grew stronger. "As the afternoon comes we can push on again. Let us gather some fruit and have a meal."

Late on the following afternoon three weary men, one a white youth dressed in tattered clothing which showed signs of much travelling, tottered across the bridge which the engineers had erected across the Prahsu, and made for the hutted camp of the British. On all sides men were bustling to and fro. Natives were carrying bales and boxes on their heads, sailors and soldiers were lolling about the open camp fires, smoking their pipes and yarning, while at the far side of the bridge was a kilted sentry, striding to and fro.

He stared at the new-comers, brought his rifle from the slope, and dropped the bayonet level with Dick's chest.

"Not so fast, me lad," he said gaily. "Where from? Whom do you want to see? 'Alt, or there's going to be trouble."

That brought them up suddenly and set Dick laughing.

"A fine welcome after two months' absence," he said. "Sentry, I want to see the Chief of the Staff, and after that Mr. Emmett. As for where I've come from, Kumasi is the answer. Now, how long have you been here?"

"My business, young feller," was the reply, when the sentry had recovered from his astonishment at being answered in his own tongue, for Dick might have been of any nationality. "Yer want the chief, do yer? 'Ere, Corporal McVittie, take these fellers to the sergeant of the guard."

A little later our hero, with his two black companions, was being marched under escort in amongst the huts, and was finally brought to a halt opposite a collection of tents devoted to the use of the leaders of the expedition. There were British officers standing or sitting in front of many of these, while the dress of some showed that they belonged to the Royal Navy. At one end of the line a Welsh Fusilier paced his solitary beat, while a blue-jacket, burly and heavily bearded, did sentry duty at the other end. And it was this latter individual who first recognized the new-comer.

"What's this!" he gasped, stepping a little way from his beat. "'Ere, sergeant, split me! but that 'ere's

Mr. Stapleton! Mr. Dick Stapleton! Do yer 'ear me?"

His face flushed red with indignation at the sight presented to him, but discipline was discipline, and already he had said too much. However, before the sergeant of the guard could answer, a number of officers emerged from a tent close by and faced the white youth and natives under escort. There was a loud exclamation of surprise, and in a moment Dick was gripping the hand of the Chief of the Staff, while close to him was Jack Emmett, bronzed with the sun, eagerly waiting for his share in the greeting.

"Bless my life! Dick Stapleton, reported as missing on the river! Where on earth have you come from? And looking so wan and thin, too!"

"From Kumasi, sir. I was taken prisoner, and escaped two nights ago. I brought these two Assims along with me. They had been tied up in the forest to see how long they could live without food and water, I suppose so that the enemy might have some augury of their fortunes. They know the ground perfectly, sir. You asked for that information, and here it is."

There was a commotion in the camp for more than an hour, and as the night fell, and the men gathered about their huge log fires, every tongue wagged on one story alone. But the noise was greatest where the bluejackets had their quarters, for there reclined the crew of the launch which had returned so disconsolately from their quest up the river. As for Dick, he had been fêted by the officers, and ever since had been engaged with the members of the staff, to whom he

gave all his news of Kumasi, and drew sketches of the road leading to the town.

"You have our congratulations," said the Chief, as he rose to bid him good night, "and I may say that you have done us inestimable service, so much so that, though it is not the usual custom, and is, indeed, an exceptional occurrence, we shall send your name home in our despatches. And now for to-morrow, when we advance. You, with your two natives, will be well in our front with the remaining scouts under Lord Gifford and others. When you come to Kumasi you may find it necessary to fall back on us for support."

"And if the Ashantis are in the same condition of panic, may I advance, sir?" asked Dick, quietly. "I have every reason for asking the question, for I know roughly the whereabouts of the captives, and if I can get in at an early hour, I may be able to save them."

"You shall have more men. You shall have your old crew, my lad. I know well that you will lead them discreetly. Save these prisoners for us, and you will have completed some very fine work. There. Off you go, Mr. Stapleton. I would willingly keep you and listen to all you have to say, but I see that you are very tired. And besides, we are off at cock-crow to-morrow."

Once more he shook hands with our hero and nodded adieu. Then he stepped across to the tent occupied by Sir Garnet, and told him of the remarkable occurrence.

"A really gallant and modest lad, General," he said, feelingly. "I could not be prouder of him had he been my own son."

When morning dawned on the following day the hutted town was all bustle and hurry, and very soon the bridge over the river resounded to the tramp of many feet, for the punitive army was on the march. The last stage of this short and historic campaign had commenced.

CHAPTER XX

The Destruction of Kumasi

EXCITEMENT rose high early that morning as the main body of the British force crossed the bridge over the Prahsu and began their invasion of Ashanti proper, for stern fighting was expected. It was known now that the protectorate on the coast side of the river was freed of all enemies, so effective had been the operations carried out by Sir Garnet, and in addition, thanks to the information supplied by Dick and his two men, and by Lord Gifford, one of the most valuable officers in this campaign, it was ascertained for certain that the road on the Ashanti side, as far as a range of hills known as the Adansi range, was also entirely clear. Beyond that the enemy lurked, while there were rumours that large bodies were operating on the flanks, prepared to close in on us.

Not a snap of the fingers did our gallant fellows care for this news. They itched to be at Kumasi, and in their hearts all had registered a vow to strike hard in the interests of mercy. For even the men who had only recently landed, and who had marched directly up-country, had seen sufficient to convince them that it

was high time that King Koffee and his barbarians were subjugated. On every road the Ashantis had left their sacrifices, wretched slaves done to death with horrible mutilations, or lashed to trees and left there to die like those two poor fellows at Kumasi. And so every man pressed forward eagerly, keen to reach Kumasi and punish these miscreants, and then eager to return to the coast again, for, despite quinine every morning, and the most rigid adherence to special rules to ward off the fever, that enemy already had a grip of the attacking force.

Dick and his little band, accompanied by Jack Emmett and Johnnie, and with a naval officer in addition, marched in the very centre of the road, wide awake, and keenly searching every bush and every likely bit of cover. As they advanced and the days passed they joined with the troops in many little skirmishes in which they drove the enemy back. At last, at a place known as Amoaful, they gained information that the Ashantis were in full force and sent back the news. Indeed, from tidings which they and Lord Gifford had gathered, there were at least twenty thousand Ashantis barring the path.

"We shall see fighting, chief," said one of the men whom Dick had rescued. "These Ashantis have chosen well, for look at the bush. We have been crossing land which is more or less open. But here it is very dense, and though there are many paths through it they are hard to follow. If we beat them now they are conquered altogether."

It was, as he had said, a most difficult piece of country, and on closer inspection it was found that the

paths to which the native had alluded were tracks about eight feet wide, down which the rain rushed in torrents in the wet season. As a consequence these paths had sunk considerably, leaving a narrow channel with steep banks, and on either side a dense and almost impenetrable barrier of forest. Yet, from previous experience, it was known that the Ashantis could and would make use of the forest, wriggling their way through it with great rapidity.

It was obvious to all that the critical hour had arrived, and very soon the orders for the advance were issued.

"You will advance and get into touch directly in your front," said the officer who came to Dick. "Fire steadily, and move on very slowly, as otherwise you may get ahead of the other detachments and run the danger of being cut off. Listen to the bugle calls, and never fire unless you are sure that it is against the enemy. It is so easy to become confused in the bush. Directly behind you will be the Highlanders, the Welsh Fusiliers, some artillery, and a couple of small guns and rocket-troughs. Be sure to notify your position to them. On the left you will have the Naval Brigade, a native regiment, some engineers and rocket-troughs. On the right there will be the remainder of the Naval Brigade, some native levies and detachments of engineers and artillery. There. You have the orders in full, and may advance immediately."

Dick saluted and went back to his men, and very soon they were engaged with the enemy. As to the other columns they broke into skirmishing order, and went forward at a run till they gained the bush. Then

the musketry duel became extremely fierce, the crackle of firearms being incessant. There had been nothing like it in the whole campaign before, for the enclosed woods added to the roar of the rifles. Our troops broke into section, three in advance of each company and one in rear, as a support, and the men soon thrust a passage for themselves through the jungle. But, just as formerly, no enemy was visible. It was a duel of sniders and rockets against guns firing slugs, and our soldiers and sailors had only the smoke and the flashes at which to aim. The air above them was torn with hundreds of pellets, and on every side the leaves and twigs fell like rain, cut and lacerated by the missiles. Men and officers were struck in all directions, and yet they persevered. At first it was very slow work, for the Ashantis clung to their posts in spite of the heavy fire. However, when some two hours had passed, and Dick and his men, who were now joined by the Highlanders, had advanced scarcely more than a hundred yards, a gun and the rocket-troughs came into action, the boom of the latter shaking the forest. They were answered by a perfect babel of shouts and the firing of thousands of guns, showing clearly the strength of the enemy. Then, as the Highlanders pressed forward and the enemy retired, and finally, as the bagpipes struck up, and the gallant Scots got to their legs and charged down the position, the Ashantis broke and ran for their lives. Meanwhile, on the right and left flanks, our flanking parties were being very heavily engaged at close quarters. At length that on the left drove their enemy back, and were able to advance, while on the right the Ashantis,

probably ignorant of the fate of their comrades on the other flank, held manfully to their position. Their fire here was terrific, so rapid, in fact, that it was thought that they must have slaves with them ready to hand loaded muskets and reload those discharged. However, as soon as the guns and rockets had got to work the order was given to advance. And now, in a few moments, the scene was changed. Hitherto our men had been fighting more or less silently, their rifles alone breaking the stillness, with an occasional boom of a gun or rocket, or a bugle-call. But as the advance was sounded, and the men plunged into the bush to hunt the enemy from his favourite lair, there was a British cheer, and then the roar of savage natives. The dusky levies whom we had enlisted, and who had done admirably in this action, were now the avengers. They slung their muskets, drew their long knives and native swords, and plunged with shrieks of delight into the forest. And numbers of Ashantis died that day at their hands, thereby paying the penalty of many an atrocity.

The engagement had lasted fully five hours, and during all that time Dick and his little party had kept together, and had fired continuously. Thanks to their previous experience, they were able to undertake this new class of warfare with more knowledge than their comrades. They kept in couples, and each couple retained its touch with that on either side by means of shouting, and in this order they left the tracks, and crept right into the woods.

"Our own side know where we are and what we are doing, so we will hold our fire whenever I signal,"

said Dick. "That means advance again some thirty yards, keep close to the ground. Then, when we are quite near the enemy I will whistle, and we will pour in our volleys."

For an hour it had been impossible to carry out this manœuvre, but gradually, as the Highlanders drove the enemy farther into the woods, Dick and his men advanced. Their method of attack proved disastrous to the Ashantis, for on several occasions the latter were so occupied with the fire from the Highlanders that they did not notice the silent approach of the sailors, and these men were able to get to quite close quarters. Then Dick's whistle sounded, a terrific volley was poured in, and at once the whole party were on their feet, charging down upon the enemy.

It was not a matter of surprise, after such a stern engagement, to find that every one of this gallant band was wounded, one sailor being entirely disabled by a slug through his thigh. The remainder had many wounds, but none of them were very serious; and later, when the overworked surgeons had a moment to spare, a few small dressings and strips of plaster were sufficient.

In this battle two hundred and fifty of our force were wounded or killed, the latter numbering, fortunately, only two. The loss of the enemy was very great, though the actual number could not be ascertained, owing to their custom of removing the bodies wherever possible. Still, there were sufficient left in the forest and on the tracks to show that their killed had been very numerous.

"And now for Kumasi," said Dick, as he and his

men threw themselves on the ground and prepared to sleep. "In four days we should be there if the enemy do not stop us. My lads, you'd better pull your belts a little tighter, for the baggage is not up yet, and we have no rations left."

It was the same with the whole force who had been in the fight; and on that night they lay down supperless, and slept just where they had fought. Dick and his men, however, contrived to fare a little better, for they had the wily Johnnie with them.

"Yo stay still like so," he said, as he strutted up to his leader. "Johnnie see to food. Plenty in de forest. Soon fetch him."

He was as good as his word, for very soon he came back with a number of plantains, and, splitting these, roasted them before the fire which had been made at the foot of a cotton tree. The meal was a welcome one, though not so nice as rations would have been on this night. However, the soldier and the sailor alike have to take matters as they come when on service, and the cheery spirits of the men of the navy were not damped in the least.

On the following day the advance again commenced, and four days later, having had one very serious meeting with the Ashantis, commanded by King Koffee in person, the troops arrived within a mile of Kumasi

"We halt here for half an hour," said an officer to Dick, as he lay in the bush with his men. "We have had a flag in from King Koffee, and have given him that time to surrender."

"Then I will creep forward and see that all is clear,"

was our hero's answer. "I have permission to do so from the general."

"In that case you may advance. But be cautious, Stapleton. There are thousands of the enemy everywhere, and it would be better to have the Highlanders near at hand."

He left the little party marvelling at the dash of this civilian soldier. But he knew what Dick's object was, and, with him, feared lest on the arrival of the force, they should find the Europeans massacred. Dick and his gallant little band, led by the natives whom he had rescued from Kumasi, at once took to the forest again, and carefully crept through it on hands and knees. No one ventured to speak a syllable, and whenever it was necessary to issue an order our hero raised his hand, gathered the men close to him, and signalled. And in this way, passing between vast bodies of fleeing Ashantis, who were so intent on procuring their own safety, that they failed to detect the presence of the British, the party came at length to the verge of the pestilential swamp which borders the town on one side. Not till then, perhaps, did the bluejackets fully comprehend the force of the tale which Dick had told them. It was only when they came actually to this spot and saw the awful results of the frequent executions which took place at this loathsome town, that they realized the agony suffered there, and the need there was to put a summary end to it all. Their teeth closed tight, and they gripped their rifles nervously.

"If they'd only stand, the cruel-hearted brutes," whispered one of the men, "we'd jest give 'em sacrifice.

This here place smells of the dead. Pah! I shall be glad when we're quit of it."

"Silence! The half-hour is up now, and in a little while we shall hear the bugle for the advance. We will march into the town at once, and shoot down any who oppose us. These natives know where the European prisoners are, and will lead us to them. As each is found, bring him along with us till we come to the last. Ah! That's the bugle."

Over the summit of the dense forest the faint notes came, sounding the last advance movement of the troops, and the knell of the blood-stained town of Kumasi. Dick and his men rose to their feet, skirted the marsh, and within ten minutes were in the town. The native guides led them at once to the quarter in which the prisoners were located. Nor were they too soon by any means. For Kumasi was gone mad. Thousands of figures fled through the wide streets to the forest beyond, while a party, some two hundred strong, told off for the purpose, no doubt, by King Koffee, were even then dragging the European captives from the prisons with the intention of conveying them to the temple of sacrifice.

"Charge!" shouted Dick, as he came in sight of the force, and at once, with a mighty cheer, the band of sailors and young officers broke into a run. And as they went, at an order from their leader, they pulled their triggers without lifting their rifles to their shoulders, sending a shower of bullets into the enemy. The Ashantis broke immediately and ran for their lives. Dick and his men at once surrounded the prisoners.

"Good gracious! The last of the prisoners! How did you manage to get away?"

Dick turned to find the very European who had spoken to him when a prisoner in Kumasi, and at once rushed forward to shake him by the hand.

"I cut my way out," he answered, "and—well, here I am, while the troops are just behind us. We have beaten the Ashantis handsomely, and they are in full flight."

"While we are safe, thanks to you," replied the other, gripping Dick's hand enthusiastically. "I heard the order given to those fellows who have just bolted. They were to take us to the execution hut and kill us. A pleasant prospect from which you have saved us! I thank you for all of my comrades and for myself."

"Then there are four of you in all?" said Dick, as he counted the prisoners off and shook each by the hand.

"Five," corrected the other. "The last is ill, poor chap. He lies over here in a hut set by itself. I will lead the way."

Still accompanied by the sailors, the party of rescued prisoners crossed the street to a hut close to the swamp. And there, a mere skeleton now, after weeks of the terrible African fever, and lying on a bed of palm leaves, was Meinheer Van Somering, hardly recognizable, too weak and ill to speak.

There is little more to tell of Kumasi. Our troops marched in within the hour of Dick's arrival and occupied the town. On the following day, King Koffee still failing to send in his messengers of peace, the

place was burned to the ground, only three houses escaping.

Then the troops turned their faces to the coast and commenced their long march back. And, as it proved, the return journey was not begun a moment too soon, for the rains commenced in earnest, and ere the coast was reached the men had to march along forest paths thick with mud, and perhaps covered by three feet of water. Where before had been smooth grass land was now a swamp, extending for considerable distances. Then, too, at the rivers, it was found that the bridges erected by the sappers with so much skill were already useless, or washed away. So the fine body of men, all more or less wounded, had to wade across, carrying their rifles above their heads. As for the sick, they were borne in hammocks, and in this manner Meinheer Van Somering reached the coast and was straightway put on board ship. Dick and Mr. Pepson joined him there, with Johnnie to act as servant. Of the gallant troops and bluejackets who took part in the campaign, a large number were stricken down with fever, and of these a large proportion died.

Never before perhaps had a campaign been conducted where such difficulties had to be contended with; and when one comes to consider the distance Kumasi lies from the coast, the extent and depth of the forests, and the extraordinary nature of the fighting, one is bound to admit that never before or since have our men showed more courage and persistence, while our officers and their gallant leader could not have displayed greater skill and foresight.

Dick returned no more to the white man's grave.

His health had been considerably impaired by his residence there, and, besides, he found work awaiting him in England. For Mr. Pepson was a wealthy man, and had need of a partner in his business.

"Not a word," he exclaimed when Dick attempted to thank him. "If I cannot do this for one who has fought my battles so well, I should indeed be ungrateful. You deserve all that I offer, and I am sure that you will make an excellent partner."

And this seemed to be the opinion also of Mr. Pepson's niece, a very charming girl some two years Dick's junior.

"Go to Africa again, Dick!" she exclaimed, when he broached the subject. "That I forbid, because uncle tells me that the climate would kill you. And he says that he needs you here in his business. Surely that is reason enough for your remaining."

There was a pretty little smile about the corners of her mouth as she said the words, and curiously enough, Dick, the stubborn, who had made up his mind to a thing out in Ashanti and had carried it out, whatever the danger and difficulty, gave way with the best of grace and with an answering smile which spoke volumes. Need the reader feel surprise when he hears that Dick first made his position strong in Mr. Pepson's business, proving without a doubt that he was of the greatest value, and that then he asked his fair friend a little question?

He has been married for many years now, and rents a fine place an hour's run from London. But once in each year our hero is wont to run up to the capital, there to meet a select party of friends, all of whom had

been engaged in that fierce campaign in Ashanti. Familiar faces are there, and many of the breasts which in that day boasted but a single decoration, now gleam with miniature medals. Dick wears a single badge, the medal presented to civilian fighters. But he and his deeds are not forgotten. There are always the heartiest greetings awaiting him, and, indeed, such is his popularity, and so well are his brave deeds remembered, that when his erect and well-known figure enters the room in which the gathering takes place, there is a general turning of heads, eager conversations are suddenly arrested, and all advance to grip his hand. There is no need for the butler at the door to announce him, for to every one this tall and unassuming gentleman is known. They smile a real welcome to him, and then the buzz of their voices breaks out again: "It's Stapleton—gallant Dick Stapleton."

THE END

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